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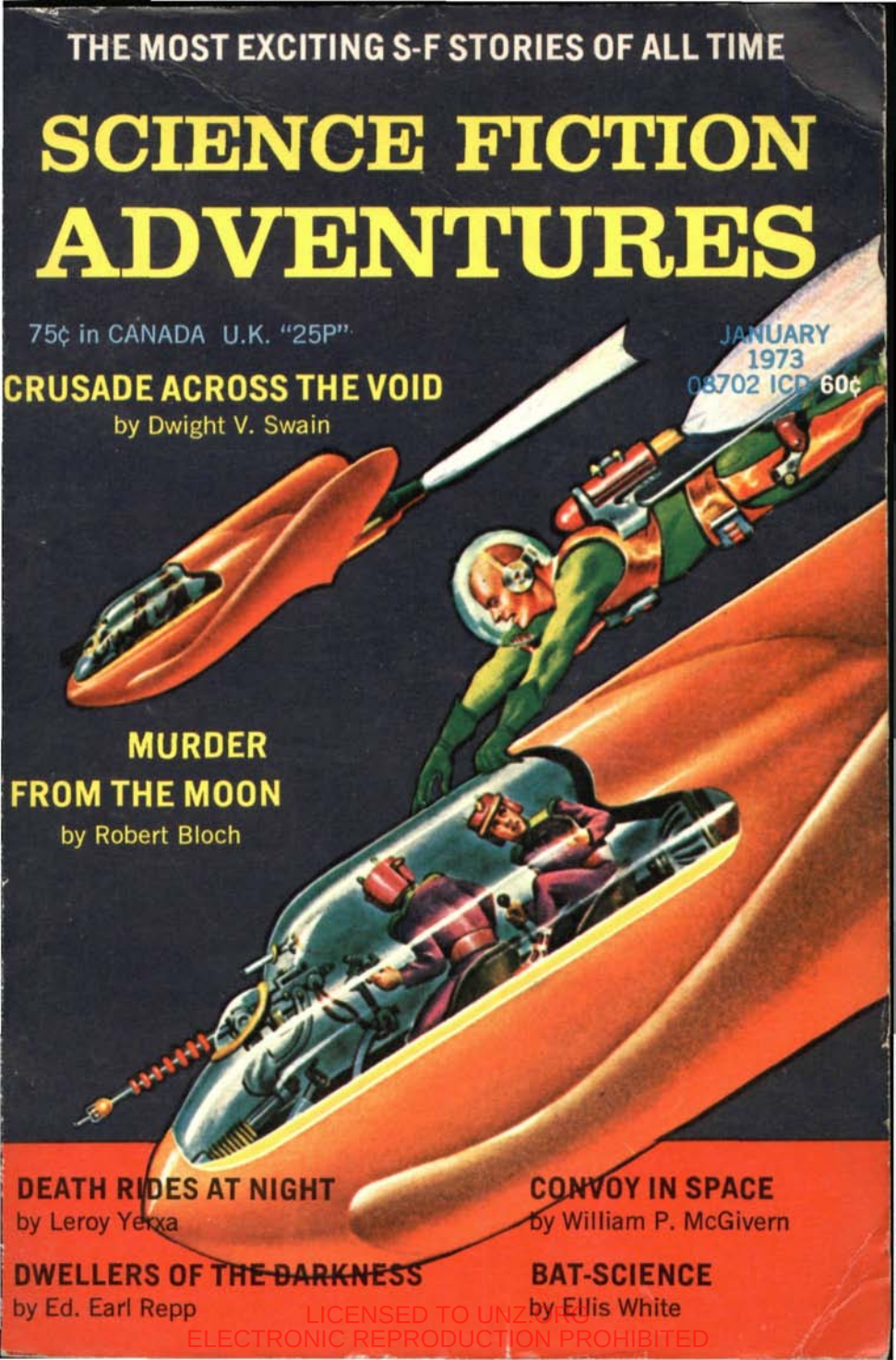

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CRUSADE ACROSS THE VOID

"Scum of the spaceways," the interplanetary police called them, but when they fought for justice, they were one blood with the crusaders!

by DWIGHT V. SWAIN

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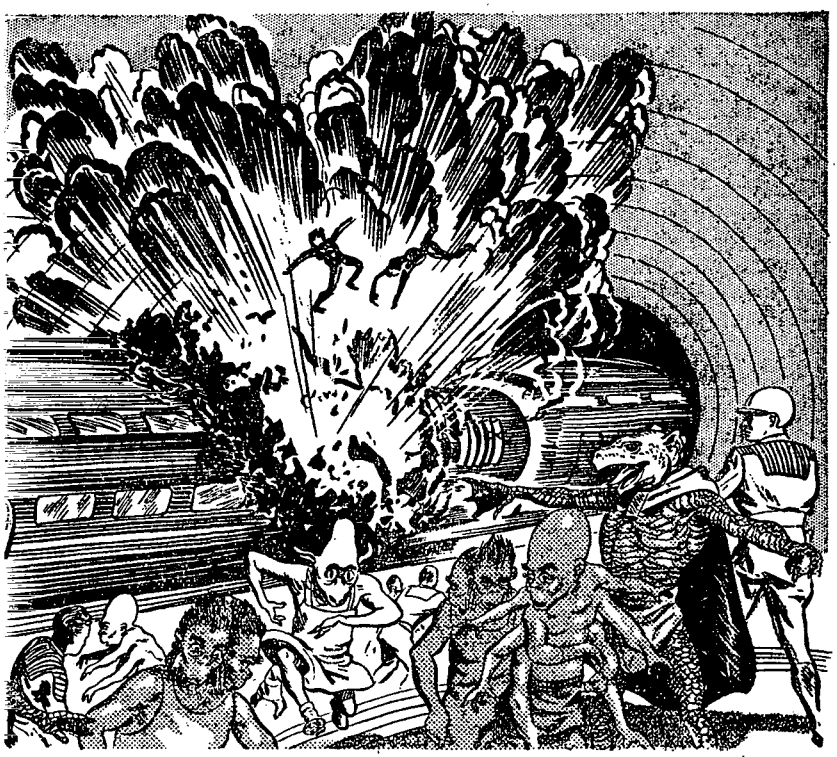
THEY dragged the *Ghost's* ruffian crew straight from the hospital laboratories to Tela's great Tribunal Hall.

A strange, wild lot, these raiders—Lizard men of Mars, scaly-skinned, basilisk-eyed, lightning fast; killers as ruthless as cobras, and dreaded from Pluto to Mercury. Shambling, eight-armed Venusians—mechanical geniuses all, deft-fingered and with warm, intelligent eyes. Hard-jawed Earthmen, eternal adventurers of the universe. Saturnians: hairy, chinless, ape-like creatures; two-headed; dull of mind but mightily muscled.

"Scum of the spaceways," the Interplanetary Police called them. "Dregs of the void."

But all fighting men. Roving the vastnesses of a whole solar system as recklessly as Earth's buccaneers prowled the Spanish Main a thousand years before them. From a dozen planets they came—outlaws, rebels, fugitives, drawn together in a brotherhood of booty by one man's will.



That man stood with them, now.

Lean he was, and tall. Brown as the sands of Mercury's sun-scorched wastes. An atavar, crowned with a shock of coal-black hair that marked

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his blood kinship to some long-dead Comanche chieftain.

Heedless of the *doloid* gyves that shackled him hand and foot, he elbowed his way to the forefront of his captive band.

Earth's vikings had willed him eyes as cold and pale and blue as the ice of their homeland's glaciers. Now, defiant and unflinching, he met the baleful, red-eyed glare of the Lundars' giant *gar*.

"You *chitzas!*" thundered the chalky Goliath on the Tribunal's throne. "Who are you? Whence come you? What can you say for yourselves?"

The freebooters' lean leader glanced up unconcernedly at the *vocodor* translating device that gave all men a universe of discourse. He surveyed the great, chill hall, with its gleaming metal walls and its echoing fastnesses. He saw the grim, silent guards, every man twelve pallid feet of rigid discipline. Noted the heavy, unfamiliar pistols which hung low on their hips.

At last he brought his attention back, again to stare, unawed, at the weird, hairless faces of the enthroned Lundar ruler and the aides who flanked him.

The gar hunched forward menacingly, eyes like pools of blood standing out in sharp contrast to the fish-belly white of his skin.

"Well?" he roared. "Answer, you *starbo!*"

The space-rover's thin lips twisted in a contemptuous sneer. When he spoke, his tone was as arrogant as the gar's.

"Who asks us?" he challenged. "Who calls Wolf Stone and his men to account for themselves?" And then, with special, deadly emphasis: "Who *dares* to do it?"

THE twelve-foot ogre on the throne sprang erect.

"I'll have you flayed alive!" he raged. "You'll pray for death—"

"—in the pits of Ra!" finished the Lundar closest beside him. "Indeed they will, Rsk!"

The gar spun on his aide.

"Who asked you, Znz?" he snarled. "You're not yet gar. When I need your advice, I'll ask it."

The Lundar called Znz shrank back into a silence that crawled with fury.

Rsk, the gar, again faced the prisoners.

"You'll learn," he said. "When first we Lundars took Tela, there were many like you here. But now they keep quiet enough—"

"No doubt," Wolf Stone retorted. "But remember, Erk—or whatever your name is—, you may find us different. Others have—"

"I'll make you crawl!" the Lundar monarch fumed. "My men shall torture you until you beg for death!"

The buccaneer leader's eyes were like blue diamonds.

"We came in peace," he said tightly. "We came a thousand light years across the void from another solar system, our lives suspended in frozen sleep. We hoped, here, to find a welcome.

"But instead, your space ships intercepted ours before the time we were scheduled to waken. Because we were asleep, you didn't have any trouble capturing us. You brought us here. Revived us as prisoners—"

"I thought you'd change your tune," the gar snarled. "Now that you understand I mean what I say, you're crawling already, you *chitza!*"

"No. Not crawling." Wolf Stone shook his head. A mirthless smile played on his thin lips. "No, Rsk. Just giving warning. That's all.

"You say you'll break us. Well, maybe you will. But you'd be wiser to kill us now."

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The pirate's smile broadened to a wolfish grin.

"Because, if you don't kill us, you chalk-faced zombie, we'll certainly kill you!" he cried. "If you miss even one of us, may whatever gods you pray to have mercy on your soul!"

"Silence, you fool—!"

"Kill us now, or we'll kill you later, Rsk!" the lean marauder taunted on, heedless of the giant's wrath. "We'll hunt you down like a rabid *zaroff!* We'll cut you to pieces and leave you to welter in whatever rotten bug-juice it is that fills your veins!"

"Silence!"

The Earthman laughed in the screaming gar's face.

"It's a promise, Rsk!" he shouted. "Wolf Stone's promise! Kill us now, you dog, or we'll see you in hell—"

The Lundar was shaking as with ague. "Take them away!" he shrieked. "Take them away! They'll die by inches—"

BUT all the gar's wild fury could not touch the free-booter chief. He was still mocking the ogrish monarch as the guards dragged him and his band from the hall.

"A short life and a merry one, men!" he cried as they were shoved aboard a subway train far below Tela's surface. "That dough-faced Nero called us in to read us our death warrants. But we gave him his own, instead!"

"You think it was smart, though, chief?"

It was the *Ghost's* first mate, Ivar, the band's lone member from Jupiter. He stood a good eight inches taller than his commander's six feet, and outweighed him by a hundred pounds—all of it bone and muscle. He was typical of his race: a hideous, hairless Cyclops, surveying the world through a single, staring eye in the center of his forehead. Four mighty arms made him a dangerous man in any fight, while his bullet head concealed a surprising amount of good sense. And, above all, he worshipped Wolf Stone.

"Smart?" said Wolf. "What do you mean?"

"To roil up this guy, Rsk, so, chief. Like as not he'll give us the ax right now."

The buccaneer leader nodded. "That's right, Ivar. He probably will." The blue eyes flashed. "But no man rides rough-shod over Wolf Stone or Wolf Stone's men, Ivar. Not in this solar system or any other. Die we may, but we'll do it with our heads up, not whining."

"Maybe you're right," the big mate muttered dubiously.

"What else could I do? He was looking for trouble. He was treating us like dogs. No matter what I'd have said, he'd have condemned us. So I decided we might as well shock him a little."

"Shock him!" snorted Ivar. "I'll say you shocked him. I'll bet my pearl-handled ray gun against a bolt of lightning the guy ain't had such a kick in the teeth since the Milky Way went sour." A pause. "Though I got no urge to let these twelve-foot pixies waltz me around if I can help it. Not with Execution Dock for a Maypole."

A broad grin of sheer amusement split Wolf's brown face. Ivar's language was better than any *televo* comic going. Then he sobered.

"We're not dead yet, Ivar," he reminded grimly. "It's one thing to catch us; another to hang on long enough to kill us. The Interplanetary Police can refresh your memory on that, in case you've forgotten."

It was the big mate's turn to grin.

"Yeah," he agreed. "Our outfit don't kill easy. I been condemned so many

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times now, myself, that I cast a shadow like a gallows. But I guess I wasn't never good enough to die young."

The train jarred to a stop and the guards herded the outlaws into a bleak station, then down a long corridor. At its end was a massive metal door.

"I don't need no X-ray eyes to know there's a jail on the other side of that slab," Ivar grunted.

His chief favored him with a cold grin. "'Stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage,'" he quoted mockingly. "At least, not for Wolf Stone. Remember, Ivar, if one man can build a jail, another can break it!"

THE mate's prediction proved correct. In a matter of minutes the *Ghost's* entire crew was being rigorously searched, put through a routine of registration, and hurried into a huge bull-pen cell.

The enclosure already had several occupants. Obviously of a different race than the Lundars, they looked much like Earthmen, and were about the same size, although their skins had the same greyish pallor as did their giant rulers. All were dressed in rags, and many were gaunt from hunger. Though intelligent in appearance, there was a broken, despondent air about them. They stared up at the space raiders with somber eyes.

"What a bunch of whipped dogs!" growled Ivar. "You'd think they were on their way to their own funerals."

Wolf Stone nodded. "Right. And maybe that's it. Maybe all of us are scheduled for our last trip out." He surveyed the dull doloid walls of their prison. Strode across to test the set of the bars cutting them off from the corridor; they were discouragingly solid.

"No windows," commented Ivar sourly, "so we can't make a break that way, like we did on Neptune."

"It's not the getting out that worries me," Wolf said. "It's what we'd do afterward. None of us has even seen the surface of this planet. We wouldn't know which way to go. Like as not, we'd run right into a bunch of these Lundars who seem to run things around here. And that would be the last of us."

"Yeah. They'd burn us up like magnesium targets."

"What we need," Wolf went on, "is a guide—"

"You want guides, did you say?"

The two buccaneer leaders whirled. Close beside them stood one of the original occupants of the bull pen. He was a stocky, well-knit young man with a handsome face. And despite the rags in which he was clad, there was, somehow, a commanding air about him. He lacked the dejection of his fellows. A spark of spirit still burned in his eyes.

"What—?"

"I have a pocket vocodor," the young man explained, pulling aside the remains of his shirt to reveal the instrument's disc. "It was granted me when a few Bans were held here, so that I could act as translator—"

"Bans?"

"Primitives from Suorz. They were taken off to Ra nearly a month ago, just as we shall be tomorrow—"

"Wait." Wolf silenced the other. "Let's get things straight. Just what's going on?"

The young man looked perplexed. "I do not understand. Where are you from, that you do not know the doings of the Lundars?"

THE space pirate's blue eyes searched the young man's brown ones. For a long moment he scruti-

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nized him weighing all he saw. Then:

"All right. I'll tell you. We're all in jail together, so I can't see that it'll do any harm.

"I'm Wolf Stone. The last of the space raiders—"

"Space raiders?"

"Pirates. Brigands. Outlaws. We held up space freighters for a living. Raided some of the biggest cities in the solar system. A few times we even knocked off whole asteroids."

"Oh. I see." The young man nodded.

"But finally," Wolf went on, "the Interplanetary Police got us holed up on a planetoid near Pluto. They hemmed us in 'til I saw we didn't have a chance in a trillion to get through their lines—"

"This name—" the other broke in, "it is not familiar. Where is this Pluto?"

Ivar snorted in disgust. "Give Wolf a chance to tell you, dope. It's in another solar system. Pluto's the planet farthest out—three-and-a-half billion miles from the sun."

"Yes," the commander continued. "You see, I figured we were just as well as dead. Then our scientist—he's a Uranian—got an idea. He said we should leave the solar system—go out across the void instead of back toward the sun. Then, by setting our unipilots on a charted course for another solar system—"

"But you would die!" expostulated the young man. "No one could live all the hundreds of light years necessary to cross the void from one system to another. It is impossible—"

"But we did it. The Interplanetary Police didn't think that even Wolf Stone would be damned fool enough to leave the system, so they'd only put a skimpy patrol out beyond Pluto. We slipped through like a mosquito through a fish-net.

"Then our scientist put us all in frozen sleep, timed to wake up at the moment when, according to his figures, we'd be in the middle of this universe. Only the Lundars captured the *Ghost*—that's our ship—before we came out of the fog. They revived us in a hospital and took us to a tough customer named Rsk. He sent us here. And that's all we know." A moment's pause. "Now you take it up from there."

The other shook his head as in a daze. "It seems incredible!" he said half-aloud.

Ivar cut him short. "We're here, ain't we?" he grunted. "So quit slobbering about it and angle the set-up for us."

"Yes. Of course." Their new friend smiled. Then: "This planet is called Tela. It is one of the four important ones in our solar system. The people who inhabit Tela are called Daus. I am one of them.

"Always there had been peace in our universe. Then, a few years ago, the Lundars—they come from Virna—struck at us; conquered us. They have made us their slaves."

"But how?" demanded Wolf, his eyes cold and calculating. "They don't look too tough to me—"

THE other smiled sadly. "We knew little of war," he explained. "Besides, the Lundars had discovered a source of power so great as to be beyond belief. They discovered that the third planet of our system, Ra, was nothing but a great lump of a radioactive ore which their scientists converted into pure energy practically without processing. They broadcast this power to their war fleet. We were beaten."

"So that's it." The buccaneer chief was sober. "No hope at all?"

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"None. Until recently the Princess Meersa and I kept up a guerrila fight. But we were captured, and now these" —he nodded toward his fellow-Daus —"the last of our fighters, lie here in prison, awaiting transfer to Ra."

"Why Ra?"

"Always the Lundars need men for Ra. The workers there die from contact with the ore within six months. A horrible death, in agony. That is why Ra is used as a penal station."

"I see." Wolf frowned. And, after a pause: "What's your name, friend?"

"Orcutt."

"Well, Orcutt, have you got any ideas on where the *Ghost* might be? It's a big ship—big enough to carry all my men, and yours beside, so there ought not to be too many landing fields big enough to take it."

The other meditated for a moment.

"I think I have it," he declared at last. "Probably the Lundars have put it in the great central port."

"Where's that?"

"It is close to the Tribunal Hall. A half-hour through the tube."

"Will you guide us there?"

Orcutt nodded. "Yes, gladly. But" —he shook his head—"it is little use to talk about it. This prison is strong, and the Lundars are many. We could never get away."

Wolf Stone's eyes flashed blue flame. His thin face was hard.

"The prison isn't built that can hold my band!" he clipped. He turned. "Ivar!"

"Here, Chief!" The big mate moved close.

The leader's eyes were once again probing the prison. Taking in every detail. Searching for the smallest weakness.

"We'll have to go out the same way we came in," he decided at last in a low voice.

"Back past them cops?" His aide looked shocked. "Chief, them Lunkers, or whatever you call 'em, ain't wearin' guns for ornaments."

The buccaneer leader gripped one of Ivar's arms. "Of course they're not ornaments. They've got them to shoot unruly prisoners like us with. But do you remember the break we made at Horosha, on Mercury?"

A slow grin spread across the mate's ugly face. "Do I remember!" he smirked. "Whoee! And I'll bet everyone on Mercury does, too."

Then, turning to Orcutt:

"How about it, buddy? Do these dopes have any kind of an alarm system to warn 'em that birds like us is trying to fly away?"

It took the young Dau a minute to digest the Jupiterian's unique phrasing of the question. Then he nodded.

"Yes. Any break in the walls, or any serious tampering with the bars, sounds a warning bell. That brings all the guards rushing out the door on the other side of the corridor, there. And since we're behind bars, they can kill us at their leisure." He sighed. "One of the bans tried to pry loose one of the wall plates. They burned him down before he could even get his fingers under it."

Ivar's bullet head nodded solemnly. "You called the turn, Wolf," he acknowledged. "They were fishing for sharks with a minnow net when they put us in here."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Wolf Stone demanded, his eyes very hard and bright. "Let's go!"

CHAPTER II

Flight for Freedom

THE stage was set in less than ten minutes. Two heavily thewed Sat-

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urnians ripped apart one of the strap-metal bunks which lined the rear of the bull-pen as easily as if it had been made of tinfoil.

A lizard man directed them at their task. When they were finished, he selected the straightest of the metal slats; had them break it in half. They did the job in such a manner that the Martian had a three-foot strip of heavy metal, pointed at one end. A very ugly sort of sword, for close-quarter stabbing.

Slat in hand, the lizard man walked over to a position close beside the bars separating the big cell from the corridor, and a few feet to the right of the point at which the door from the police squad room opened into the opposite side of the hall.

Five Saturnians now gathered at the other end of the bull-pen, several feet to the left of the squad room door. They gripped one of the bars between them and the hallway.

"Stop them!" cried Orcutt. "Don't you understand, Wolf Stone? If they try to pull out that bar, the Lundar guards will shoot them down—"

"Let me worry about it," the raider snapped.

The others of the band were hastily equipping themselves with the remainder of the bunk slats.

Wolf Stone surveyed the scene through narrowed eyes: The Martian, at one end of the cell. The Saturnians, at the other. The remainder of his men, crouched eagerly in the background.

"Ready?"

The lizard man waved his pointed metal slat. "Ai!"

"Uhhh!" chorused the Saturnians.

"Now!"

As one man, the Saturnians heaved. Their great muscles rippled and swelled. Their powerful backs seemed to spread with the strain. But the bar held firm.

Again they heaved, and again. Their horrible, hairy faces twisted with effort. They bared their fangs—

Then, suddenly, like a sapling in the wind, the bar bent inward. Tore loose from its settings.

A hell of clanging bells broke out. The squad room door burst open. A twelve-foot Lundar guard rushed into the corridor, gun in hand. His eyes fastened on the Saturnians.

But before he could so much as raise his weapon, the lizard man behind him, at the other end of the bull-pen, hurled the three-foot metal slat. Like a silver streak, it sped through the air, whistling a song of death. The point drove home between the Lundar's shoulders in a hammer-blow. He staggered. Bent at the knees. Slumped forward, blocking the doorway.

The same instant the bar gave way, another Martian sprang. He leaped across the Saturnians. Through the gap in the bars. Across the hall. His scaly reptilean claw snatched the gun from the Lundar's dying hand. He blazed away with it, criss-crossing the squad room with streaks of purple light. The Lundars' cries changed from roars of rage to screams of panic.

The rest of the *Ghost's* wild crew were swarming out of the cell and into the hall.

THROUGH the doorway they surged, makeshift weapons swinging, faces contorted with grimaces of hate. This was work they knew how to do—killer's work; work for Wolf Stone's raiders!

Wolf himself was in the forefront. He hurled himself forward, drove a long strip of slatting into the pit of a staggering Lundar's stomach with all his might.

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"Prisons, Ivar!" he bellowed "They've not yet made the prison that will hold us!"

And beside him, the mate, a captured light-gun in hand, roared back a savage affirmation.

Close on their former captors' heels, the raiders rushed down the tunnel to the subway station.

But, from one corner of his eye, Wolf caught a glimpse of Orcutt, the Dau, jerking open another of the squad room's doors and disappearing through it. The Earthman stopped short.

"What's he up to?" he muttered half-aloud. "He's supposed to guide us."

For the fraction of a second Wolf hesitated. Then he raced in pursuit of the young Dau.

A long corridor stretched beyond the door through which Orcutt had disappeared. But there was no sign of him. Wolf sped along it. At its end loomed the shadowy black well of a descending staircase. Noiseless as a wraith, the space raider slipped down it.

The stairs ended in a dimly lighted chamber. A door was set in its far side. Before it, Orcut blasted savagely at the lock with a Lundar light gun. Silently hugging the shadows, Wolf watched him work.

A moment later the lock gave way. The heavy portal swung open.

"Orcutt!" cried a voice from the blackness beyond.

"Meersa!"

The next instant the lithe, slender figure of a girl stumbled out of the darkness and into the stocky young Dau's arms. Her pale, lovely face was radiant with joy.

"How did you do it?" she gasped. "Oh, Orcutt, how did you get away?"

Orcutt's voice was choked with emotion. "Meersa, my princess! You are safe!" Then: "All our men are free, saved from the Lundars by strange creatures from another universe. Already they have destroyed the guard squad, and—"

"Look out!"

The girl's voice was shrill with fear. She jerked free from the man's arms. Her hand shot out, whipped the light gun from his grasp. She snapped a shaft of purple brilliance toward the stairs. It missed Wolf's head by inches.

The buccaneer lunged forward in a somersaulting fall that carried him all the way across the chamber. He landed in a heap in a far corner. Took in the scene with one glance.

The Dau princess still stood tense by the door, gun raised, eyes wide with excitement. Orcutt half-crouched close beside her, paralyzed with shock.

And, looming on the stairs like a drunken Frankenstein, tottered the monster figure of a Lundar guard. His red eyes were staring, face twisted in awful surprise, hands clutching at a black cavern that yawned in the center of his chest, where the bolt of light had struck. Even as Wolf watched, the giant went limp. Plunged to the floor.

Orcutt's eyes flashed across the corpse to where the Earthman sprawled.

"Wolf Stone!" he gasped. "How came you here?"

SLOWLY, the buccaneer got to his feet. His blue eyes were centered on the girl, Meersa, drawn to her as filings to a magnet. Ignoring the young Dau's query, he approached her.

"You saved my life," he said gruffly.

Tela's princess gazed up at his lean face. "I cannot claim credit," she said. "I was thinking of myself, and of Orcutt. I saw the Lundar even before I realized you were in the shadows. My shooting was instinctive."

Then, to Orcutt:

"But who is this man? Whence does

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he come? I do not recognize him, nor his race."

"He is Wolf Stone," the stocky Dau explained. "He is the one of whom I told you—the creature from another universe who released us all from the Lundars' grasp—"

But the space raider's eyes still were riveted on the girl. "You saved my life," he repeated. "One step more and that thing"—he jerked his head toward the corpse—"would have killed me. He must have played dead when my men passed through the squad room, then followed me when I came after Orcutt."

"It is nothing," murmured the Princess Meersa.

A grim smile rippled over Wolf's thin lips.

"Nothing?" he mocked. "My life is nothing? Princess, to me it is everything! I have fought my way through a sea of blood to preserve it.

"But now it is mine no longer. You have saved it, so it is yours."

There was a fierce intensity in his tone that made the girl's breath come faster. She dropped her eyes.

"Please—" she whispered. "I ask no credit—"

The Earthman said: "My life is yours. I must redeem it."

"No—"

"Yes!" Blue fire danced in the raider's eyes. "I'll buy back my life on my own terms." His jaw was hard. "Hear me, Princess! From this moment on, your fight is my fight. The Lundars have been your enemies; now they are mine! I'll stand with you 'til they are but a memory. It is a promise, Princess! Wolf Stone's promise!"

Orcutt said: "We are wasting time. Soon the alarm will spread. More of the Lundars will be rushed here to seize us."

His words seemed to break the Earthman's spell. He turned.

"Right. Come on."

Together, the three hurried up the stairs and down the corridor to the squad room. Half-way there they met Ivar, running toward them.

"We been hunting for you like a Plutonian for trouble," he greeted his chief. "We was scared one of them zombies had sunk a ax in the back of your neck."

"Not yet," Wolf grinned. "What's doing?"

An unpleasant, mirthless smile lit up the big mate's face. "They tried to run," he chuckled. "Them big dopes tried to run. But we shot faster."

A FEW minutes later they were entering the subway station. Raiders and Daus alike were milling about nervously. Lundar bodies littered the platform. Several others were strewn along the tracks, some of them burned beyond recognition through falling against third rails apparently similar to those used by early Earth underground systems.

Meersa saw them. "Oh!" she choked.

Ivar shrugged. "Don't worry about 'em. They was out to kill us, only we got 'em first."

"That isn't what she means," burst out Orcutt. "Don't you see? Anything falling across those rails causes a short circuit. It warns Rsk's headquarters that something's wrong up here. They'll send out a squad to find out."

"Then it's time we got moving," snapped Wolf.

"Yes," spoke up Meersa. "We can go down the tracks. The last station is in the foothills. From it we can escape into the mountains. We can hide there."

"No," said Wolf Stone.

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"What?"

"No, we're not going to hide." The buccaneer's blue eyes danced with a daredevil light. "That's what the Lundars expect us to try. If we do it, they can hunt us down at their leisure."

"But what else can we do?" demanded Orcutt, puzzled.

Wolf laughed harshly.

"We can attack!" he cried. "We can do the thing they least expect. We can put *them* on the defensive."

"You mean—?"

"We're goin' back. Back to the central port you told me about, where the *Ghost's* stored." He turned to his mate. "Ivar!"

"Sure, Chief!"

"Scout around. See if there's any way we can get back to that shiny mausoleum of Rsk's—"

The big man from Jupiter grinned like a delirious sculptor's gargoyle. "We already done it, Chief," he announced. "Some of them goons run off down that siding"—he jerked one of his four brawny arms toward a narrow passage into which a spur of track ran—"but me and a few of the boys lighted their way for 'em." He slapped the light gun in his belt in grim significance.

"When we caught up to 'em," he then concluded, "we saw they'd been trying to make it to that little train we come down on. It's there now."

Wolf's eyes flashed back to Orcutt. "Can you pilot the things?"

The Dau nodded. "My men can."

"All right. Let's go."

Daus and raiders alike swarmed aboard the underground train. The men of Tela no longer looked broken and dejected. The swashbuckling, reckless spirit of the buccaneers had communicated itself to them. They moved now with hands up, eyes glowing with excitement.

Half a dozen lizard men scrambled onto the train's head end, their scaly claws gripping weapons. A Dau, directed by Orcutt, took the controls. The vehicle jerked forward. Gained speed. Careened down the blackness of the tunnel, back toward Rsk's Tribunal Hall.

Wolf Stone turned to Meersa. "What is Rsk? Sort of a military governor?"

"No." The Dau princess shook her lovely head. "He is the gar—that is, the king, the ruler—of all the Lundars—"

"But I thought they came from another planet—"

"They do," Meersa nodded. "From Virna. But it is far out from our sun. Tela, our own planet, is more centrally located. That is why the Lundars have made it their capitol, the place from which they rule our whole solar system."

"Fine rulers!" snarled Wolf. "The way they treated us—"

THE princess of Tela smiled sadly. "They treat my people worse," she said. "The Lundars believe themselves to be a superior race. The more so since the happenstance of their planet's development resulted in them being twice our size. They see in my people only serfs—dirt under their feet. They kill ruthlessly. They delight in torture. In the glory of their power, they see might as the only right—"

Wolf Stone's eyes were dark. "I've seen such before," he said. "If it had not been for their likes, I might never have come to Tela." There was an almost cruel twist to his lips. "Well, if force is the only language they can understand, that's the one we'll talk to them. And believe me, princess, my men and I are fluent in it. . . ."

"Chief! Trouble!"

It was big Ivar's harsh voice. The

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Earthman sprang to his side.

They were coming into a familiar station—the station below Rsk's great Tribunal Hall. The platform thronged with Lundars. All were armed.

"It's the party being sent down to see what is wrong at the prison!" shouted Orcutt.

"Keep moving, then!" roared Wolf. "Don't stop here. Get on up to the next station before they start shooting!"

The train picked up speed. But barely in time. Light guns already were out and blasting at them.

"They're coming, chief!" Ivar bellowed. "They got another train. They're on our tails."

Wolf caught Orcutt's arm. "Hurry up! Get more speed out of this thing!"

"It is going as fast as it can now."

The raider chief turned. He could see the glowing headlight of the pursuing train, speeding along directly behind them.

"Where's the next station?"

"Just beyond the central port."

"How long before we hit it?"

"Another minute. No more."

"Men!" Wolf roared.

The babble of strange tongues ceased as if it had been cut off with a knife.

"In another forty seconds we stop. I want every man out onto the platform and ready for a fight before the wheels quit spinning!"

The Earthman spun back on Orcutt. "Does this outfit have a reverse?"

The Dau nodded. "Yes."

"Then tell your man to put it at full speed back the second we stop."

"You mean—?" The stocky man of Tela stared back at the glowing headlight of the pursuing train. Then: "Of course! They are on the same track —"

"Right." Wolf smiled grimly. "I told you my side played rough. These Lundars are in for trouble."

The next instant they pitched forward, thrown off balance by the sudden braking of the vehicle.

"Come on!" Wolf roared.

LIKE magic, the train emptied. Wolf shoved Orcutt and Meersa onto the platform. By the time his own feet hit, the cars were backing faster and faster.

From down the tracks came the scream of brakes.

Ivar said: "Them zombies must of catched on, huh, chief?"

But the Lundars were too late. Already their train was within feet of the other. No force could halt it in time.

Crash!

A hideous cacophony of rending metal and Lundar shrieks shredded the darkness. Then blue flame leaped in balls about the wreck.

"The electricity!" came Princess Meersa's horrified gasp. "It has passed the insulators! It kills them all. Nothing could live through it."

"Come on!" snapped Wolf. "We've got to get to the *Ghost*."

They raced up a long stairway, out of the subway and toward Tela's surface.

Ahead, from the first of the raiders, came sudden shouts of tumult.

"Hurry up!"

Wolf ran ahead. He came out into a strange world of purple and gleaming metal. Buildings of unfamiliar architecture towered all about. It was the raider's first glimpse of this world's outdoors.

But he had no time to stand and contemplate. His men were fighting savagely against the onslaught of a Lundar troop. More of the giants were pouring into the street from a dozen directions.

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Orcutt rushed out of the subway tunnel. Wolf caught his arm.

"Where's the port?"

"There. Back there." The Dau pointed toward a monstrous metal heap towering behind them.

The Earthman shouted orders. His crew began falling back, fighting their way toward the structure. They had only one advantage: surrounded as they were by the giant Lundars, they could fire at will with their captured light guns; but their enemies could not, for fear of hitting each other.

With the desperation of the already damned, they hacked their way. A dozen times the force of numbers almost overwhelmed them. Once a Lundar caught Wolf's shoulder, almost broke it before the Earthman could shoot his way free.

And then, miraculously, they were within the gigantic central port before their enemies realized their goal. The great metal doors slid shut. The raiders swarmed to take defensive posts beside the entrances. Others hunted down the handful of Lundars trapped within.

But Wolf and his chief aides raced through the monster building's corridors. Hurried into elevators. Rushed to where the *Ghost* stood empty and idle.

Brief minutes of inspection told the story. Their great, black pirate ship was safe. Ready to take off down the long runway at a moment's notice.

"The jackpot!" whooped the irrepressible Ivar. "The old girl's as frisky as a *zotar* in mating season. All we got to do is let her roll!"

"Then you had better do it!" retorted a lizard man who had just sped up. His lidless eyes sought Wolf. "We are holding them below," he reported tersely. "But they are many. Soon they will break through. We must take off quickly if we are to live to fight again."

But Wolf's face was tense and desperate. He was staring off down the metal runway, and through the exit port beyond.

"How did the *Ghost* get in here?" he grated to Orcutt.

The Dau's face showed bewilderment. "How? Why, through the entrance port at the other end of the building. You take off down this runway—"

"No."

"What—?"

"That building's in the way. The big one down there." The buccaneer leader's blue eyes were sharp with worry.

"But, surely—"

"Your ships must be smaller and more maneuverable than ours. The *Ghost's* too big ever to make it. And we can't turn it around to go out the same way it came in. It's too big for that, too."

"Then what—?"

Wolf Stone drew a deep breath. "Nothing. Orcutt, we're trapped. We fought our way here, and now—we can't get out. The Lundars have got us!"

CHAPTER III

Enter Znz

THERE was a long moment of stunned silence.

At last Princess Meersa spoke. Desperation was in her voice.

"We can't fail now! Not after we've gotten this far. There must be some way—"

Wolf smiled bleakly, ran long, nervous fingers through his Indian-black hair.

"Sure," he agreed, "there's a way.

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There always is. The only question is: can we find it in time, before those devils outside break through and cut our throats?"

Ivar's voice broke in like an exclamation point. "Wolf!"

The raider chief spun about. His big Jupiterian mate had gone off with the lizard man in charge of the defenses. Now he was running back.

"We ain't got enough to hold 'em, Wolf," he gasped out. "Them palefaces has gotten in. They keep coming, just like a bunch of them black beetles on Mercury, that even fire can't stop."

"They've gotten in!" The other's lean face was drawn and tense. "What—"

"The boys have fallen back. We're holding 'em in this section, on the second level. But that ain't going to be long. They keep coming, Wolf. They just keep coming—"

Like a caged lion, Wolf paced the floor. Then:

"Where's Moko, our scientist?"

"Down below," grunted the mate. "The last I saw of him, he was playing tit-tat-toe on one of them zombies with a light gun."

"Get him up here, then. And send along a bunch of Venusians."

"You got an idea, chief?"

"Half a one. Hurry up!"

Seconds later the stooped figure of the raiders' Uranian scientist hurried down the runway toward the spot where Meersa, Orcutt, and Wolf stood beside the *Ghost*. Close on his heels were half a dozen of the weird-appearing mechanics of the crew, eight-armed Venusians.

"Yes, yes?" sputtered Moko, the purple beard which covered the top half of his face twitched nervously, while his bright little eyes darted this way and that. "What is it, Wolf? What do you want?"

"We've got to get the *Ghost* out of here," the leader reported tersely. "That building down there is in the way, though. So we'll have to turn the ship around and go out the same way we came in."

"Yes, yes. Go on."

"To turn the ship, we'll have to tear the guts out of this whole section of the port. Can we do it?"

The Uranian scurried off down the runway. He shot glances from one side of the monster hangar to the other. Glanced hurriedly at the structural network overhead. For perhaps a minute he studied the problem. At last he returned to Wolf.

"No. Can't do it."

"What do you mean, can't? Why not?"

"Hmph!" The little scientist snorted. "Can't you see? Cut out enough of the bracing to give space to turn the *Ghost* around and the whole place would cave in. Architecture reminds me of Pluto. All part of a unit. Pull out one piece and the whole thing falls down."

THE buccaneer chief bit his thin lip hard. "We've got to figure an angle. We've got to get out—fast!"

"Chief!" Again Ivar rushed up. "We've had to fall back to the third level. And now they're bringing up some big outfits that look like artillery to me—"

"Atom projectors!" choked Orcutt. "They throw bolts of energy. Nothing can withstand them. But that they do such damage, and that the Lundars are so proud of this great port building, no doubt they would have used them before. One blast, from the biggest projectors, and this whole place would be a mass of smouldering ashes!"

"Maybe we could do some blasting, too, chief!" Ivar suggested. He waved one of his four brawny arms at the

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Ghost. "Why don't we use our proton cannons on that there building that's in our way? We could blow it from here to Neptune—"

"Nonsense!" broke in Moko the Uranian peevishly. "At close range, yes. But that building's too far off. We wouldn't even damage it. Not from here."

"Wolf Stone!" cried Meersa. "I have an idea!"

"What is it?"

"Why don't we abandon your ship? We can escape in the Lundars' space freighters—"

"We cannot, Meersa," interrupted Orcutt. "They no longer dock freighters here. Only a fleet of little aerocars do they keep here. They are good only on Tela, you know. They cannot go beyond the stratosphere."

Little Moko, the scientist, skittered about nervously.

"If only we had explosives!" he fretted. "We could load the aerocars and pilot them by radio over to that building. That would get it out of the way."

Wolf Stone stopped short. A flash of sudden enthusiasm — of hope — drove the worry from his blue eyes.

"That's it!" he cried.

"No. No." Moko was adamant. "We haven't any explosives, Wolf. If we had, yes. But we haven't."

"We don't need explosives—"

A lizard man rushed up. "More than a few minutes more we cannot hold, Wolf Stone!" he reported, his cold voice tense. "Already the Lundars have inflicted heavy losses. Now they hurl bolts of power at us. We cannot retreat much farther—"

The lean pirate chief turned on Ivar.

"Quick!" he snapped harshly. "Line up every aerocar in the place for a fast flight to that building."

He whirled to Moko.

"Get the radio directional apparatus ready. Hurry!"

"But we haven't any explosives—"

"I know it. Do as I say now. You can argue later."

Then, to the Martian:

"And you: get the men ready for a fast run up here. Tell them to board the *Ghost* and prepare for action."

Tela's princess, close beside him, stared up in puzzlement. "I do not understand," she said.

But the *Ghost's* commander paid her no heed. A dynamo of energy, blue eyes afire, he snapped curt orders right and left to the crew members who now hurried about him.

IVAR panted up, sweat pouring from every pore. "I got 'em ready, chief! Orcutt's turning 'em on now. They got no power plants, you know. Pick their juice right out of the air from this Ra place. So I ain't had to worry about that."

"Right." Wheeling, the other ran up the *Ghost's* ladder to where Moko was working. "How much longer?"

"Nearly ready now," fluttered the Uranian, brushing wisps of purple beard back out of his eyes. "Another minute. That's all. Be all ready to pilot those aerocars wherever you want them to go. But no explosives. It's silly, without explosives—"

Wolf ran back out of the space ship.

"Ivar!"

"Here, chief!"

"Get below. The second the men get a breathing spell, have them abandon their posts. Get them up here. Every last man of them."

"You bet, chief. On the nose." The big mate lumbered off.

Wolf hesitated long enough to flash Meersa a thin smile.

"If you know any prayers," he told her, "now's the time to say 'em. If my scheme works, we'll live to harass the

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Lundars from one end of your solar system to the other. If it doesn't—well, lady, you'll never live to worry about it."

"But what—"

Before the buccaneer could answer, the *Ghost's* crew came across the port floor in a rush. Into the ship they poured.

"Moko! Have you got that radio directional apparatus ready?"

"Yes, yes. All ready. But you can't—"

"Ivar!"

From the rear of the motley band swarming into the *Ghost* came the mate's ready, "Here, chief!"

"All aboard?"

"Yeah. All on. But we got to do whatever we're going to fast. Them Loonies'll catch on that we ain't down there fighting in another second—"

"Close the hatches!" Wolf shouted. "Prepare for flight!"

The space ship's sound detectors caught the tumult of Lundar shouts from the abandoned barricades below.

"See!" growled Ivar. "They're wise already. No dust on their tails, may they rot!"

Wolf Stone's cold blue eyes stabbed at Moko the Uranian.

"Take off those aerocars!" he clipped. "Set them down on the roof-field of that old building that's in our way. In regular formation, as if they were loaded to the ailerons with men."

"But what good—"

"Do it!" Wolf roared. "Don't argue! Do it! Now!" His voice was like a lash of flame.

The Uranian hunched over the maze of radio equipment. He twisted dials, threw levers.

INTO the *Ghost's* telescreen—sighted on the building which loomed black against the sky at the far end of the runway—came myriad forms, like squads of tiny insects maneuvering. They moved toward the building.

Through the sound detectors came the Lundars' wild shrieks of rage.

The next instant half a dozen of the little aerocars burst in mid-flight like clay pigeons.

"The atom-projectors!" cried Orcutt. "They're not afraid to use them now."

The raider chief paid him no heed. "Now!" he cried. "Hurry, Moko! Bring them down on the roof."

Like swallows, the aerocars swooped down, precisely obedient to the little scientist's manipulations of the radio directional equipment. One after another, they landed.

"Now! Watch!" Wolf grated.

Almost at the same moment, it happened.

Like a house of cards crumpling, one corner of the big building that barred the *Ghost's* way vanished. Faster, faster, it disintegrated. Its weather-scarred surface caved under an invisible bombardment. Then, with a rending crash, one whole side gave way. The entire structure tottered perilously for a moment. Hung on the verge of complete collapse. Let go at last. Crumbled into a heap of smouldering ashes.

"Take off!" roared Wolf Stone. "Set a course for outer space!"

His words were still echoing through the control room's confines as the great ship blasted down the runway, out of the port, and off over Tela's sprawling capital city.

Ivar, eyes still bulging with amazement, stared at his commander.

"I don't get it, chief," he complained dolefully. "One minute that big shanty was as solid as the mountains of Jupiter. The next, it was caving in like it was made of fog and soapsuds."

Wolf smiled thinly.

"It's just as I told you, Ivar," he ex-

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plained. "There's always a way out, if you can only think of it. This time, it was aerocars and atom projectors. Moko gave me the idea when he spoke of blasting that building with explosives—only we didn't have any.

"Then it hit me. I saw that if we flew that fleet of aerocars over to the other building, the Lundars would blast the whole place out of the way. Especially since it was an old building. They'd already gotten so desperate they were using small projectors even back there in the central port, which they certainly *didn't* want to destroy."

"Uh . . . I don't get it yet, chief. Why'd they go off their nuts about them empty hacks?"

"OF ALL the thick-headed apes!" the leader exploded. "Ivar, you Jupiterian jackass, the Lundars thought we were in those aerocars. That's why I timed the take-off so carefully. What would you think, if someone you were fighting disappeared, and a minute later a ship just around the corner took off? We were all here, in the *Ghost*, with the hatches closed. So the Lundars figured—just like anyone would—that we were running for it."

"But how could you be sure?" broke in Meersa. "How could you know that they'd destroy that building, instead of storming it, the way they did this one?"

The Earthman shrugged. There was a reckless twist to the corners of his mouth.

"I couldn't know," he answered. "It was just a gamble that worked. Just a putting of myself in the Lundars' place—figuring how I'd feel if someone I thought I'd trapped made a clean getaway. It made them jittery. They wanted to swat us, hard and fast. And the quickest way was to blow the whole building out of the universe—"

The lovely Dau princess nodded. "Yes. I can see it, now. You are a clever man, Wolf Stone—"

The buccaneer nodded, in his turn. "I'd be lying if I denied it," he told her grimly. "The only reason I'm alive is that I've been clever enough to dodge a hundred traps. When a space pirate keeps his head on his shoulders, it's proof he's clever."

"And now—?"

The raider's eyes were almost dreamy.

"Now," he answered, "we give Rsk, gar of the Lundars, the worst headache he's had since he quit making mud pies and throwing snowballs.

"Already," he went on, grinning wolfishly and running his thin fingers through the heavy black hair that crowned his head, "we've disturbed his peace of mind a bit, I imagine. One day after we recover consciousness, we stage a successful mass jailbreak." He chuckled. "That's the stuff nervous breakdowns are made of."

"What do we do first?" Orcutt demanded enthusiastically.

"We establish a base. Some spot we can work from. A place we can fortify—"

"I know just the place!" cried the Dau. "It is a small asteroid, a satellite of Suorz. The Lundars fortified it during their war against the primitives who inhabit Suorz, but by now they must have withdrawn all but a small garrison. If we capture it, we can use the long-range atom projectors they mounted there to fight them off—"

"Just the place!"

A Saturnian shambled in.

"Big space freighter off our bow," he mumbled in the strange, guttural speech of his people. "The Daus say it's a Lundar ship."

Again Wolf grinned. "Sorry, friends," he announced, "but this means changing our plans. We'll have to postpone

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setting up a base until we can clean up a business transaction — something involving the cargo of a Lundar freighter."

THEY were mad days, those that followed. Days that saw the *Ghost* cruising from one end of the solar system to the other, hovering over every Lundar like a hawk above a coopful of chickens. Days when Rsk's battle cruisers swarmed the spaceways in vain, searching for an enemy they could never find. Days that brought terror to the farthest Lundar outpost, and fear of raiders even to Virna, the giants' home planet.

Days in which Wolf Stone showed why Interplanetary Police reward posters had termed him the most dangerous pirate who ever roamed the void.

One lightning attack gave the buccaneers the asteroid Orcutt had described. The *Ghost's* proton cannons blasted three-quarters of the garrison to oblivion even before the Lundars realized they were being attacked, and the rest went down under a single swift, savage rush. From that day on, the raiders had an almost impregnable base from which to operate.

But Wolf Stone was not satisfied.

"Yes," he told Meersa, Orcutt, and Ivar one day after a particularly successful attack on Tela, "we're causing a lot of trouble. But that isn't enough. The Lundars are getting better organized, now. They're tightening their patrols. Hemming us in a little closer all the time. Sooner or later the day will come when we can't send the *Ghost* out." He paced the floor, his face grim with worry. "We've got to figure out something bigger. Something that will paralyze the Lundars—"

"But every raid brings us new recruits from the oppressed peoples," Meersa objected. "We know that they would revolt if they could—"

"But they can't!" Wolf snapped back savagely. "They want to, but as long as the Lundars have the arms, no one can fight back. And our raids are not much beyond nuisance value, now." He shook his head. "No. We're wearing ourselves out, yet we haven't really accomplished anything when it comes to cracking Rsk's regime."

"Oh, but—"

The princess's sentence was never finished. A Martian lizard man burst into the room, cutting her off.

"Lundar cruiser approaching, sir!" he snapped to Wolf. "They're flashing truce signals."

"Truce?" The buccaneer frowned. "That doesn't make sense."

"But that's what they're doing, sir. It looks like they're coming in for a landing."

There was a long moment of tense silence. Then:

"Put one of the Daus who talks Lundar on the interspacial radio. Have him warn them that they'll be blown out of the sky the instant they try anything funny."

"Yes, sir."

THE Martian hurried away, while Wolf crossed the room to a telescreen.

Sure enough, a Lundar ship was bearing down on them.

"It's one of Rsk's personal cruisers!" cried Orcutt excitedly.

Meersa's enthusiasm equalled that of her stocky aide. "Maybe he wants to arrange a peace!" she suggested breathlessly. "Maybe his nerves are cracking—"

"No." Wolf shook his head. "It couldn't be that. After all, what peace terms can you make with a pirate? Certainly he's not going to agree to free all the planets he's seized. Yet that's

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obviously the only solution, so far as we're concerned."

"They're landing, chief!" Ivar broke in. "Some guy is getting out. Must be a big shot, too. He's wearing enough medals to build an aerocar."

Again the door opened, and the lizard man stepped in.

"A visitor, sir," he told the leader. "An envoy from the Lundars."

"Not Rsk, is it?" demanded Wolf.

"No, sir. It's his aide, the sub-gar."

"The sub-gar!" gasped Meersa and Orcutt in chorus. There was horror in their eyes.

Then: --

"Not even Rsk would be so foolish as to send the sub-gar," whispered Meersa.

"No!" choked Orcutt. "Even the Lundars hate him as a fiend. He is the one who has had charge of 'pacifying' all subject races. He wallows in blood. No man in all Tela would treat with him. It cannot be him—not the sub-gar."

"We'll soon find out." Wolf turned to the Martian. "What's his name?"

But before the lizard man could answer, another voice cut in. It was a strange voice, deep and rumbling, and there was something in it that sent little chills of stark terror racing up and down every spine in the room.

"I am the sub-gar," the voice said, from beyond the doorway. "I, Znz!"

CHAPTER IV

Double-Cross

THE raider chief stared up at the giant Lundar who stalked through the entrance.

"We've met before," he remarked.

"Have we?" asked the sub-gar in a puzzled tone. "I did not know—"

"Your memory's short," retorted Wolf. "Indeed, Znz, we have met before. You stood with Rsk when my men and I were dragged before him. In fact"—he smiled thinly—"you suggested that we be sent to die in the pits of Ra, your power planet."

"Yeah," grunted Ivar, moving relentlessly forward like a great, four-armed gorilla. "That wasn't nice. I hear them pits is no honeymoon cruise. But you wanted to send us to 'em—"

Wolf caught one of the Jupiterian's arms. "Forget it," he snapped. "This is no time to pick a fight."

The Lundar's white face twisted in a grimace apparently intended to represent a smile.

"My thanks," he said. "I should hate to have to hurt one of your men—"

"No thanks are necessary," the other snapped. "My reason for stopping Ivar was that you must have had some reason for coming here. I want to know what it is."

The sub-gar's red eyes shot glances at Meersa and Orcutt.

"What I have to say is for your ears, alone," he murmured. "These others—too much knowledge might hurt them. It would be unwise—"

For a long moment the Earthman eyed the Lundar narrowly. Then he turned to Ivar. "Take our friends outside," he ordered.

The Dau princess flared.

"I will not be ordered about!" she cried. "You are not my superior—"

Wolf's eyes bored holes in hers. "I am in command here," he snapped. "You will leave. Now!"

"You can't—" Orcutt began.

"Ivar!"

The big mate shot his chief a single rebellious glance, then turned on the two Daus.

"Quit stalling!" he snarled. "You heard him. Get moving. You ain't snoring; quit acting like you was

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asleep." He herded the still-protesting pair from the room.

The pirate leader turned back to Znz.

"All right," he clipped, "I've done what you wanted. Now talk!"

The sub-gar smirked. He said: "You and I have much in common, Wolf Stone!"

"Have we?" The Earthman's lips were compressed to a thin, dangerous line. "Perhaps you'd better explain what you mean."

"Of course." A moment's pause. Then: "I mean, Wolf Stone, that we both do as we like. When we see something we want, we take it. Both of us are ruthless; that is why we have risen to power."

The space raider eyed Znz warily. "Go on. Tell me what this is all leading up to."

Again the smile-grimace. The Lundar hunched forward confidentially.

"TOGETHER we can rule a universe!" he cried dramatically. "How would you like that, my friend? To loot whole worlds, instead of single freighters! To rule planets, instead of one space ship's crew! To have nations bowing before you—women fighting for your favor—"

"A pretty picture," Wolf agreed. "You have a good imagination, Znz—"

"But it is more than imagination!" the Lundar said tensely. "Together, Wolf Stone, you and I can make that vision reality. We can rule this solar system. We can make every living creature pay tribute for even being allowed to breathe—"

The Earthman bared his teeth in a mirthless smile.

"And my allies, the Daus?" he demanded. "Where do they fit in?"

Znz smiled back. "They do not," he said. "They are weak fools, meant to be ruled by men like us." A moment's pause. "Surely a leader like you would not let such slaves stand in his way. Surely you can see—"

"I am a believer in expediency," Wolf retorted. "I'm the original opportunist. I make my alliances to fit my needs. So far, my best bet—my only one, in fact—has been the Daus. But if you can show me something better—" He gazed reflectively at the Lundar.

The sub-gar chuckled. It was like the sound of an avalanche of ice.

"I told you we were two of a kind!" he cried. "We see things alike."

"But so far," the Earthman reminded him, "there has been nothing to see. Or did you come all the way here from Tela in order to talk over my personal philosophy?"

"No. I came here in order to get your aid. Together, we can overthrow Rsk—"

Wolf nodded. "Yes. So I gathered. But how do we do it? That's the only question that counts."

The sub-gar took a deep breath.

"Your success against us has laid the groundwork," he explained. "There have been murmurings against Rsk.

"Now I have taken advantage of them. I have persuaded certain of our garrison commanders to join in a revolt. With you to aid us, it cannot but succeed."

"How does it work?" the Earthman demanded. Interest was written across his lean face.

"You know of Ra?"

"Your power planet? Yes. We thought about raiding it, but finally decided it was too strongly guarded."

"That is right," agreed the sub-gar. "Without help, you could do nothing."

"That is why we need each other. I have friends on Ra. They will revolt as you attack. You will seize Ra!"

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"Then what?"

"Then you will turn off the power which is broadcast from Ra to every corner of the solar system. It will cripple Rsk. The atom projectors—the light guns—the space ships—the whole mechanism of our civilization—will be paralyzed."

"I see." Wolf ran his fingers thoughtfully through his thick black hair. "And what do you do?"

A SMIRK distorted the Lundar's face.

"I have long been gathering weapons," he explained, a crafty light in his red eyes. "Old weapons, all of them. Weapons which do not use the power broadcast from Ra. I have space ships, too, and aerocars, and the flying suits which we used in the days before Ra's conquest.

"With them, my men can seize Tela, Virna, and Suorz alike. Rsk will be helpless without power—and before he realizes what is happening, he will be dead!"

"I see."

"Well, what about it?" The sub-gar leaned forward eagerly. "Is it not a good plan? Can you find its flaw? Will you join me?"

The Earthman considered long and carefully. At last his cold blue eyes met the bloody orbs of the Lundar.

"I'm your man," he said grimly. "We'll do the job together, and to hell with whoever gets in the way!"

Znz exploded to his feet from the table on which he had been resting his twelve-foot frame.

"I knew you would see it!" he cried. "I knew that the loot of a universe would tempt you!"

"As it does you," the buccaneer commented bleakly. "I don't have any illusions about your purity of heart, Znz."

"Of course not," chuckled the pale giant. "Did I not tell you we were of the same cut? We both look after ourselves first." A wild spasm of laughter shook him. "Ah, Rsk! How he'll love it when he finds that this 'inspection tour' I'm making of our patrols actually is the preliminary step to his death! He'll wish he'd never treated me like a second-rate *starbo* before he's through, the *chitza!*"

"No doubt," agreed Wolf, somewhat caustically. "But now, if you can stop gloating, let's get down to details."

More than an hour passed before the plans for Ra's invasion and conquest were completed. When they were done, Znz once again embarked. His space cruiser moved off into the void, while Wolf hurried off to find Ivar.

The big Jupiterian was talking to Orcutt when the Earthman strode up.

"Some act you put on, Chief," the mate greeted him. "You sure sold that Loonie a bill of goods. Me and Orcutt and Meersa was listening outside the door."

A thin-lipped smile crossed Wolf's face. "Yes," he admitted, "it was quite a bill of good, as you say. Quite a different one than Friend Znz is expecting, anyhow. He'll find that a double-cross can work two ways."

"You mean," said Orcutt, the Dau, "that you are not betraying my princess and me?"

The look the raider shot him was as bleak as a January gale.

"Do you think so little of Wolf Stone's word as that?" he clipped. "Have I shown myself to be the kind of a dog that would turn on those who saved his life, for the sake of loot?"

The young Dau's eyes dropped. "I—I did not mean it so," he stammered in embarrassment. "It was only that you call yourself a pirate . . . and your words were so convincing when

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you spoke to Znz . . ."

"I BEEN putting the dope on the right track, Chief," Ivar broke in. "I gave him the whole works—all about how you turned pirate just because the Interplanetary Federation over on our side of the void was pulling a Hitler—"

"You'd do better to keep your mouth shut!" barked the commander, his own face suddenly pale at this mention of the past. He turned on Orcutt. "Well, are you satisfied now? Or do you still think I've sold you out—"

"Please—I am sorry—"

"All right." A pause. "It's pretty obvious what Znz wants to do. He needs us to capture Ra for him, but you can stake your life that he's not planning on letting us stay with him at the finish. Some place or other along the line, he'll see to it that we're wiped out, leaving him to run things to suit himself."

"Sure, Chief. We ain't supposed to have a chance. He'd sell his own mother to Saturn. It sticks out like a *podor's* horns."

"Right. And it's no compliment to his intelligence that he thinks I'd fall for it."

Orcutt, his composure now recovered, broke in: "But what do you plan to do? You agreed to his plan, so—"

"We're going to give that traitor a surprise," the other answered. "We'll capture Ra for him, sure. But after we've got it—"

"That's something else, huh, Chief?" snorted Ivar.

"It is indeed. This is the break we've been waiting for, and we'll make the most of it. Alone, we could never defeat the Lundars. But with Znz to aid us for the time being—well, on Earth we have a saying, 'divide and conquer'." Then: "There's a lot to do. I've got to get to work."

Orcutt caught his arm as he turned to go.

"Could you . . . first . . . speak to Meersa?" the young Dau asked.

"Meersa? Why? What about?"

The princess' stocky aide shifted his feet uneasily.

"She was very sure you had betrayed us," he explained finally. "She would not even stay. She ran off before you had finished talking to Znz."

"Where'd she go?"

"I do not know. To her quarters, probably. . . . If you would see her . . ."

"Sure. Come on."

Together, the pair walked across the grounds of the garrison post to the little building in which the princess of Tela lived. Wolf knocked on the door.

"Meersa! I want to see you."

An echoing silence was his only answer.

"Meersa! Open up!"

Still silence.

The spaceman jerked open the door. He and Orcutt pushed into the Dau princess' room.

There was no one there.

"EMPTY!" exclaimed Orcutt.

"Certainly looks that way," admitted the Earthman. His blue eyes probed every corner of the chamber. He prowled about restlessly.

"I don't like it," he said at last. "I've got a feeling something's wrong."

Orcutt, the Dau, nodded acquiescence. "I, also." His broad, white face looked strained.

Wolf turned sharply.

"Probably we're seeing ghosts," he announced. "Let's go have a look around the rest of the garrison before we get worried about things."

Together, he and Meersa's stocky young aide hurried off across the grounds. From post to post they went,

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searching, inquiring, looking into every likely and unlikely place of the asteroid's garrison for the girl. But an hour's investigation brought no results.

"Where can she be?" Orcutt fretted nervously. "I cannot understand."

Wolf frowned. "Just what did she say when she left?" he quizzed.

"She was very angry. At me, because I could not believe that you were betraying us, as well as at you. She swore she would no longer keep the company of traitors to Tela's cause. Then she ran out."

"Would she have been foolish enough to try to leave?" the Earthman pondered. "No matter how sore she was, would she . . ."

"Let us go to the landing port," proposed Orcutt. "There we have not yet looked. And the men there will at least know whether any ship has taken off—"

"Right. Come on."

But again they were doomed to meet with disappointment. The Venusian in charge of the transport unit shook his head.

"I am sorry, my commander," he reported, "but no ship has taken off since morning."

"None at all?"

"None—that is, except the Lundar cruiser that brought Znz hither."

"The Lundar cruiser!" exclaimed Orcutt. "Wolf Stone! Could Meersa have been taken by them—"

The Venusian interrupted. "It is the Princess Meersa you seek, my commander?"

"Yes, of course," Wolf snapped. "Have you seen her? Has she been here—"

"Yes. She arrived two hours ago, and went out among the ships. I have not seen her since—"

"Wolf!" cried Orcutt. "Could the Lundars have seized her? Could they have taken her away?"

The Earthman's blue eyes blazed. "I can't believe it," he snapped. "Their cruiser was under guard every minute. But if they did—if somehow they got Meersa on board—ah, what a master stroke!"

THE Venusian who had charge of the port was pushing buzzer buttons with all eight arms.

"I shall have every inch of the port, and every ship, searched immediately, my commander," he declared. "If the princess is here, she will be found, or—"

"No," snapped Wolf. "We can't waste time on a search now. If that girl's in Znz' hands, every minute we delay means that she'll be that much farther away."

"But what can we do?" protested Orcutt feverishly. "What else is there to try?"

The raider chief's lean brown face was grim. His voice was tight-clipped, pregnant with suppressed emotion.

"We'll follow!" he snapped. "The *Ghost* can outrun anything in the void. By morning, we'll have caught up with Znz. We'll force him to heave to for a search—"

"But your plans—your arrangements for joining forces with him to dethrone Rsk and seize the solar system—"

The Earthman shoved back an unruly lock of jet-black hair. His lips were even thinner than usual. "If necessary," he rapped curtly, "those plans will have to go by the board. Meersa's life is worth more than any of them. Once, she saved me. Now, I'll protect her, no matter how much it costs us."

He turned on the Venusian. "Order a skeleton crew onto the *Ghost*. We take off in ten minutes."

They bettered the time he specified. Seven minutes from the moment he spoke, the great space ship was in the

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air, hurtling out of the asteroid's atmosphere and on across interstellar space in the wake of the Lundar cruiser. Ten hours later they were abreast their prey.

A Venusian interspacial radio man came to Wolf.

"The Lundars want to know why we are pursuing them," he reported.

"Answer that we're looking for the Princess Meersa, and that we intend to come alongside and search their ship for her," the Earthman answered.

A minute later the Venusian looked up from his instruments again.

"Znz says they do not know what you are talking about, but that they have no intention of letting us or anyone else search them."

Wolf Stone's blue eyes flashed fire. He leaned forward like an animated threat.

"Tell them they can take their choice—be searched, or be blown to hell," he snapped savagely. "Tell them that if they think they can fight off the *Ghost*, they're welcome to try it. But that they shouldn't be surprised if they never see their home port again."

And, to a Martian gunner's mate who stood at his elbow:

"Man the proton cannons! Open fire at your own discretion, at the first sign of anything suspicious."

The Venusian said: "Znz protests, but says he will submit to temporarily superior force. You may go aboard the cruiser."

THE sub-gar's red eyes were seething with anger as Wolf and a searching party boarded the Lundar ship through an air-lock.

"You put great stock by this Dau princess, Wolf Stone," he said, in a voice that shook with rage. "Too much stock. I wonder if perhaps you were not lying when you agreed to join me. If perhaps you do not mean to uphold the cause of the Daus against me—to betray me if you get the chance."

The Earthman turned on him, lean jaw hard.

"Let's not make any mistakes, Znz," he bit off coldly. "You don't trust me, and I don't trust you. We've got no reasons to, and you know it as well as I do.

"The reason we're joining forces is because we both want loot and power. Alone, we're weak. Together, we can tear a universe to pieces. So, for the time being, our interests are parallel, and either of us would be a fool to betray the other until we've gotten what we want.

"As far as the Princess Meersa is concerned, she's mine. I want her. I intend to have her—as a woman, not as a princess. And no one—sub-gar or not, ally or not—is going to stand in my way on that.

"For that matter, I wouldn't let you get away with stealing a cross-eyed *starbo*, let alone kidnapping one of my people. You'd think it proved I was afraid of you, and that I could be pushed around." He grinned wolfishly. "And neither of those ideas is correct, you know, Znz, so you might as well put up with this search gracefully."

The Lundar had regained his self-control.

"Very well, Wolf Stone," he purred. "If I must, I must." Then, smirking: "Though you should be able to do better for yourself — with our whole solar system to choose from—than to take up with a Dau princess, a woman of a subject race."

"We'll leave my taste out of it," Wolf rapped curtly.

A lizard man entered Znz' cabin. He saluted Wolf.

"The Princess Meersa is not aboard

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this ship, sir," he reported in the chill, lisping voice characteristic of his race. "We have searched every inch of it, from stem to stern, but we find no traces of her."

"Right." The raider chief turned back to Znz. "My apologies. It seems that my suspicions were not well-founded."

Again the Lundar smirked. "No apologies are necessary," he declared with a ring of complete insincerity. "Such errors are quite understandable in a man of your violent temperament. We shall think no more—"

"Commander!"

It was the Venusian radio man. He rushed into the cabin waving a sheet of paper.

"Well?"

"The princess has been found, my commander. I have just received word of it from the asteroid garrison."

"Where was she?"

"She was hiding in a small torpedo ship, sir. Before anyone could stop her, she took off."

"A torpedo ship?" Wolf's brows knitted. "But with a limited range like they have—"

"There is only one place she could go, my commander. Only one planet close enough. By now, no doubt, she is fast approaching the wilderness of Suorz!"

CHAPTER V

Attack on Ra

ORCUTT, the Dau, said: "But aren't you going to search for her, at least? We cannot go away to Ra, leaving her helpless and alone on Suorz." His broad face was lined with worry.

Wolf Stone paused in his personal supervision of the *Ghost's* loading.

"Sorry, Orcutt," he said, "but I'm afraid that's just what we're going to have to do. Znz already suspects things aren't exactly what they seem; and if we give him time, he may get so jumpy he'll act on fear, instead of sticking to a logical appreciation of his own best interests. So I figure our best bet is to act now—fast! Once we get Ra—"

"But Meersa!" the stocky young Dau protested. "She may be in danger. Even now, she may be dead—"

"Sorry, Orcutt."

"Then I won't go!"

Wolf gazed at him. "And what do you propose to do?" he asked.

"I'll take a torpedo ship and go after her myself," the Dau flared. "I'll show her there's one man who cares more her her, herself, than for any dream of conquest—"

"Orcutt, Orcutt!" the Earthman reproached. "Can't you see it doesn't make sense? What Meersa wants is freedom for the Daus, not personal safety. Furthermore, she's well able to take care of herself on Suorz. There's only three groups there—the Lundars, whom she'll be careful to avoid; the Bans, who are so primitive and dull-witted they're not at all likely to hurt her; and a colony of your own people, the Daus, who'll go out of their way to watch over her."

"But Suorz is a wilderness," the other persisted stubbornly. "Millions of square miles of the worst kind of country, with nothing inhabiting most of it but *quirsts* and *peens*." He glared at Wolf. "Have you ever seen a *quirst?* We've got some in the great interplanetary zoo back on Tela. They're like snakes with arms. Let them even breathe on you and you will welcome death. They are the most venomous creatures in the whole solar system. They strike without warning, for the sheer love of killing. Think of poor

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Meersa, there on Suorz, with them!" He shuddered.

"I wish I could agree with you," answered Wolf quietly, "but I can't. I'm as anxious as you are to protect Meersa—you saw how quickly I ordered the *Ghost* into action when I thought the Lundars had her; but right now, I think she's safe. And if she isn't, frankly, it's because she's acted like a stubborn kid instead of a woman with the responsibilities of a princess."

"Well," sulked Orcutt, "I still won't go to Ra. Meersa means more—"

"All right, then; go wandering off across Suorz in a torpedo ship if you want to!" snapped the Earthman, his patience exhausted. "Do whatever you want to. But I've got work to do, so leave me alone."

Turning on his heel, he again gave his full attention to the *Ghost's* loading.

AN HOUR later Orcutt, in a tiny, two-man torpedo ship, took off for Suorz.

It was nearly two days after the *Ghost's* return from intercepting the Lundar cruiser, however, before Wolf completed preparations for the invasion of Ra.

"It looks good, chief," Ivar grunted as they finally blasted off from their asteroid base. "The old girl's in swell shape. And them new atom projectors the Daus showed us how to build—say, them is going to be quite a shock for the Loonies on Ra. Imagine being able to blow a bunch of guys to kingdom come with their own power!"

Wolf nodded. "It's a sweet set-up, all right, Ivar. If there's a flaw to it, I haven't been able to find it."

The Venusian in charge of the radio room came in. "A code message from Znz, my commander," he reported. "He says all details are ready. We are to attack on signal, and at the positions indicated previously."

"Right." Wolf turned back to his mate. "Full speed ahead, Ivar. The quicker we get there, the quicker we can go into action."

But despite the *Ghost's* best speed, the trip to the remote little power planet took more than a week. Then, at last, they were hanging in interstellar space above it.

"There it stands, Ivar," Wolf said softly, his eyes gleaming, lean face tense. "That little globe we see below us is the key to the Lundar civilization. Smash it, and we've smashed them."

The big mate nodded. "Yeah. Without the power they send out from there, them Loonies are up a creek." A pause. "What angle we working, chief? How do we hit 'em?"

"We come in on a beam," the buccaneer leader answered. "By following it, we can get close enough to blast their defenses. Znz' followers are immobilizing the atom-projectors in that area."

"Uhhh," grunted his aide.

Wolf eyed him narrowly. "What's the trouble, Ivar? You don't sound too enthusiastic."

"Uhhh . . ."

"Go ahead. Tell me. What is it?"

The big Jupiterian raised one of his four brawny arms, scratched the back of his bull neck reflectively.

"Chief," he demanded at last, very solemnly, "do you figure this Znz Loonie is on the up-and-up? Or is he throwing a loose peg, like a Uranian gambler in a *horo* game?"

"I see what you're getting at, all right." Wolf nodded slowly. "And the answer is: no, I don't trust him as far as I could throw him—which isn't far, considering that he's twelve feet tall and not too easy tossing."

"I DON'T like that beam business, chief," his mate announced grimly.

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"What I mean is, maybe it's supposed to guide us in, and then again, maybe it ain't. Maybe it's just supposed to put us right where them zombies down on Ra can blow us clear out of the solar system, without no chance at all of missing."

The raider chief frowned. "I don't think that's it, Ivar," he said. "After all, Znz has got to have somebody to cut off the power, or his uprisings on Virna and Tele are going to go haywire."

"Has he?"

"What do you mean?" The Earthman eyed the burly man from Jupiter with an air of puzzlement.

"Well—" Ivar gnawed his lip, struggling to find words to fit his meaning—, "well, it's like this. If I was Znz, I sure never would deal you in."

"How would you get around it?"

"Look, chief, if Znz has got a bunch of his own guys on Ra, why don't they just bust up the outfit that broadcasts the power? It'd be lots easier than knocking off a whole batch of atom-projector batteries, wouldn't it?" He thumped one big fist into the palm of another hand for emphasis. "You ask me, chief, that Znz lug is playing you for a sap. He ain't planning to cut you in on nothing. All he wants to do is kill us all off, so we ain't going to be messing around while he's got his revolution on the fire."

There was a long moment of silence, broken only by the creak of Wolf Stone's footsteps as he paced the floor. His thin lips were compressed tightly against his teeth, and his blue eyes were narrowed and hard.

"It adds up," he said at last. "God knows it adds up, Ivar. Smashing the power broadcast equipment would stop Rsk just as thoroughly as letting us capture Ra—and with a lot less danger of trouble, too. By blasting us, he'd kill two birds with one stone—"

The Earthman stopped in mid-sentence. He whirled to face his mate.

"You win, Ivar!" he snapped. "From here on out, we play it alone."

A grin like a half-moon pasted itself on the big Jupiterian's face.

"Swell, chief!" he grunted. "What's our angle now? Do we still try to knock off Ra?"

The other nodded. "Sure. With this solar system out of power, we hold all the cards."

"How do we work it?"

A reckless, daredevil grin twisted the corners of the Earthman's mouth.

"We attack, Ivar. We attack, just like we promised to. Only instead of letting Znz name the place and time, we'll choose our own."

"Where and when, chief?"

"The place? The other side of Ra, Ivar. And the time? Why, Ivar,"—and the raider's eyes flashed fire—"the time is as fast as we can get there!"

TENSE minutes followed. Minutes of tumult, as the *Ghost* changed course and the indicators moved forward to "full speed ahead." Alert minutes, with every piece of gear being checked and rechecked. But, above all, joyous, exciting minutes—the minutes in which fighting men from a dozen worlds girded themselves again for battle.

"We'll come in fast," Wolf rapped to his aides. "With luck, we'll be on top of those devils down below before they realize what's up. When we land—well, we'll let that take care of itself."

The next instant they plunged Raward.

Centered in the telescreen, the little power planet grew larger by the second. It filled the ground glass, developed details of geography, broke into all the multitudinous landscapes that go to make up a world.

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"Them Loonies ain't wise yet, chief," Ivar grunted from his place beside Wolf. "They ain't opened up on us at all yet. And we're nearly down, too."

As if to contradict him, the *Ghost* suddenly rocked from side to side, like a kite in a thunderstorm.

"Ai! That was close!" the mate gasped.

But before the words were out of his mouth, a great splash of light flared on Ra's surface.

"Good shooting!" exclaimed Wolf. "They missed us with their first barrage, but we got them with ours. We're one up on them!"

Other batteries now joined the battle. The bolts from their atom projectors tore at the pirate ship. With deadly aim, the *Ghost's* gunners gave them back good measure.

Then, suddenly, the ship was through the worst of the hail of death.

"That's the trouble with them atom projectors," Ivar thundered into Wolf's ear. "They may be all right for long range stuff, but when you get up close, where you have to place your shots fast, give me a proton cannon any day."

Already, these latter were taking a terrific toll of Ra's defenders. Every time a battery on the ground opened fire, the awful shafts of energy belched from the *Ghost,* smashing the mightiest defenses as if they were cardboard.

"We are landing, my commander!" cried the Venusian at the helm.

"We've blasted the last of the batteries on this side of the planet!" echoed the lizard man who headed the gunners. "We can use it for a base."

A minute later the great space ship was sliding to a precarious stop amid the ruins of the silenced atom projectors.

BUT now came a new menace. From all sides, in rushed mobile, tank-like units, while overhead tiny torpedo ships and armed aerocars whistled down to harass the invaders with a storm of deadly energy-bolts.

"No wonder this place got the reputation of being impregnable," grated Wolf. "They've got every known defense on hand and ready for action. Except for surprising them, we wouldn't have gotten within a hundred miles of the ground before we'd have been blasted to nothing."

"What do we do now, chief?" Ivar demanded a bit anxiously. "Some of them outfits is getting a little too close for comfort. They'll have our range in a minute, and then—wham!"

"Yes. I know." The other's face was taut with strain. He paced the floor. "The trouble is, we haven't got the man-power to take over the rest of the planet. And as long as the Lundars are here, we're penned up like chickens in a coop."

"Yeah," grunted Ivar dourly. "What's more, they got the mines and the energy, and we ain't. And we sure could use some."

"The mines!"

"Huh? What did you say, chief?"

But Wolf was shouting for the Venusian navigator-pilot. In a moment the eight-armed creature came running up.

"Yes, my commander?"

"We're making a run for the head of the mine-shafts!" snapped the Earthman. "Prepare for a take-off."

Then, to the Martian gunners' mate: "Get ready for a fight. A real one!"

Ivar caught at his arm.

"What's got into you, chief?" he demanded. "Them mines is where the Loonies will have the heaviest artillery they got. If we go there—"

Wolf turned on him.

"We've got to do it!" he grated. "We can't retreat now—they'd nail us before we got ten miles out. That means we've

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got to stay here and win."

"Well," growled the Jupiterian dubiously, "maybe the shock'll lick 'em. But I doubt it."

The buccaneer leader flashed him a brief grin.

"If we can get those mine shafts, we'll have more than shock to use to lick 'em," he retorted.

The next instant the *Ghost* was again in the air. Like a monster skyrocket, it blazed across Ra's sky, its mighty proton cannons carving a path for it through the heart of the Lundar defenses.

Then it stumbled in mid-flight like a stricken hawk. Almost fell.

"We are hit, sir!" shouted the Martian gunners' mate. "They have torn a bad gash near our stern."

"Our power plant is crippled, my commander!" called out a Venusian.

"Can we make it to the mines?"

"Limping, perhaps; but we shall be an easy target."

"Hear that, you gunners?" Wolf roared. "We're bogged down. That means you've got to wipe out every Lundar battery within range. If one gets a clear shot at us now—"

A crippled bird, the *Ghost* lurched onward. Then:

"Up ahead, chief! The mine shafts!"

"Crash in to a landing! We'll make our fight around the shafts!"

WITH an avalanche roar of rending metal and cracking rock, the *Ghost* came in. Almost in the shadow of the great slag piles that surrounded the mine heads, she lurched to a stop.

"The mines! Run for them!"

The *Ghost* belched forth men. Weapons in hand, they stormed across the yard that separated their battered ship from the looming tipples.

A dozen Lundars sprang up to oppose them, light guns spearing forth purple rays. They went down like ten-pins beneath the wave of raiders.

"The slag piles!" roared Wolf. "Occupy them! Make them our barricades!"

Another party of Lundars, the crew of an atom-projector battery, burst into view. A swarm of buccaneers rushed to meet them. Wolf was in the forefront.

"I want a prisoner!" he shouted as he dropped the first of the enemy party with a deadly Earth ray gun. "Save me one prisoner!"

Then there was no time for talking. Not even for shouting orders. The pirates were grappling hand-to-hand with their giant foes. Making up for small stature with a savagery the paste-colored ogres could not withstand.

A moment that was eternity, and the job was done. The Lundars who had guarded the mine shafts were dead, all but one of them. And he lay prostrate, panting, held down by Ivar and two mighty-thewed Saturnians, his lymph-like blood oozing from a shoulder wound where one of the Saturnians had bitten him in a dozen places.

Back on the slag piles, the rest of the *Ghost's* crew were sweating their lives away, dragging proton cannons and atom projectors to makeshift emplacements.

Wolf Stone bent over the captive Lundar.

"Where are the slaves?" he questioned fiercely. "Where are the Daus, and the Bans, and all the rest of the poor devils you've got working these hell-holes?"

The giant tried to spit in the Earthman's face.

The raider chief gestured peremptorily. One of the Saturnians—both of his horrible, hairy heads grinning ghoulishly—braced himself. He gripped the Lundar's arm in a grasp of iron.

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The massive muscles of his back and shoulders swelled. With one jerk he snapped the prisoner's arm.

A cry of agony burst from the Lundar's white lips. Sweat stood out on his forehead.

"I want to know! Where are the slaves?" Wolf's voice had the ring of doom itself.

The Saturnian caught the Lundar's other arm.

"No!" shrieked the prisoner. "They are in the first shaft. Their quarters are at its foot. All are there—"

"That's all I want to know!" snapped the Earthman. "Come on, men!" He ran toward the mine the Lundar had indicated.

The two Saturnians shambled after him. Only Ivar hesitated. He pulled his ray gun. Levelled it at the prisoner's head. His finger tightened on the trigger . . .

WOLF and the Saturnians scrambled into a monster mine car, weapons in hand, alert for trickery. Deep into the bowels of Ra they plummeted. Down . . . down . . . down . . . until at last the car reached bottom. A narrow tunnel led still further into the depths. They followed it, tense and expectant, straining their eyes in the dim light.

Then two Lundar guards loomed before them, light guns in hand.

The first Wolf dropped with a single ray gun blast. The Saturnians sprang like tigers onto the other, disdaining even to use their weapons, so great was their love of battle.

Beyond them loomed a great metal door. The buccaneer leader blasted at its lock. Watched the metal fuse and twist and drop away.

The door swung open.

The sight beyond would have chilled the heart of Ivan the Terrible, himself.

For a moment the three raiders stood in stunned silence, staring at a sight the like of which not one of them had ever seen before.

"And I thought Neptune's salt pits were the closest I would ever be to hell!" Wolf whispered at last.

Then he and the Saturnians were moving forward, among the awful, wasted, rotted forms of the men who gave this universe its power. Strong men, they had been. And some of them —the younger, and those but recently brought here—still were. But most of them lay like putrefying corpses, too stupefied to move.

"Men!" shouted Wolf in the dialect of the Daus. "You're free—free to fight the Lundars again!"

At first they would not, could not, believe him. Precious minutes dragged by while he explained, argued, debated. Then, all at once, it seemed to dawn on them. Like a human tidal wave, they came alive. Poured out of their prison and down the tunnel to where the mine cars waited.

Ivar was at the head of the shaft.

"Chief! What you been doing?" he cried. "We need you bad. Them Loonies is too much for us. They got us outnumbered, and they're pushing us back."

"They don't outnumber us any more, Ivar!" Wolf answered grimly. "Break out some guns! I've brought us a battalion from hell!"

CHAPTER VI

When Worlds Collide

HATE turned to action is an awful thing. It took the slaves from the mines of Ra less than two days to slash and blast and stab their way to complete control of the little power planet. Free again, armed by the raid-

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ers, no Lundar could withstand them as they charged forward in one mad rush after another, welcoming death as a friend come to release them from the lingering agony of an existence poisoned by the awful radioactivity of the metal they had been mining.

In a week, Venusian repairmen had the *Ghost* nearly ready for flight again. Others of the crew were exploring every inch of Ra's surface, while Moko, the Uranian scientist, was beside himself with joy at the opportunity to investigate the system of power broadcasting developed by the Lundars.

"Simple. Really it is. Quite simple," he assured Wolf. "Electrolytic process. The ore's so pure that all they have to do is to shoot the current through it. Turns it into pure energy. They pick it up as vibrations. Broadcast it. The receivers reconvert the waves into power."

"I think we ought to turn a little of it into power right now, then," grunted Ivar, who stood beside the commander. "That big goon, Znz, ain't wasting time, you can bet your neck on that. By now he's probably got Rsk run short-legged. Believe me, chief, we ought to turn on enough power for interspacial radio work, anyhow. Then we could get an angle on what's cooking."

But Wolf Stone shook his head.

"No," he said. "Not until the *Ghost* is ready to cruise again. Give the Lundars power, and they might sweep down on us before we could stop them. And with the *Ghost* crippled, what could we send out to stop them? Nothing but the bunch of broken-down, atomic-powered freighters we captured from the Lundars here.

"No." He shook his head again. "We'd be trapped here, with nothing but ground defenses. And if we could break those defenses once, someone else could do it again. We're better off to leave the power turned off completely."

"You don't make sense, chief," his mate protested. "If anyone started to attack us, we could snap the power off, and they'd be left drifting—"

"Maybe. Or maybe the power would let them get just close enough to come the rest of the way with some other kind of energy. Sorry, Ivar. But the power stays turned off. We're raiders. We need a ship under our feet. Not to be trapped on a stinking little planet like this one."

"Can't stay too long, though," broke in Moko. "Got to leave soon."

"Why?"

The Uranian smoothed the purple beard that covered the upper half of his face.

"Too dangerous," he retorted. "This whole planet's one big lump of radioactivity. You've seen the sores. The ones on the Daus and Bans, and all the rest who worked in the mines. They rot away. It's the ore. Whole planet's that way—"

"You mean—"

"Get us too, if we stay too long. Got to take off. Quick—"

The door burst open. A Martian rushed in.

"There is a ship approaching, sir!" he exclaimed. "We sighted it but a moment ago."

"A SHIP?" Wolf went tense. "But how—?"

"They had space ships in this solar system before them Loonies knocked off Ra and got all worked up over the broadcast power idea, chief," Ivar reminded him. "Maybe there's still some of them old outfits kicking around, huh? Like them freighters we found here."

"Could be. But we better take a look."

They hurried outside.

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"It is still too far out to be visible to the naked eye, sir," the Martian reported. "We saw it through the telescreen magnifier on board the *Ghost*."

"Right. We'll go on board. See to it that our proton cannon are ready."

A Venusian was manipulating the telescreen.

"It is larger now, my commander," he announced. "The ship comes closer."

Together, Wolf and Ivar studied the image in the screen.

"Something new to me, chief," grunted the big mate, frowning. "I never seen one like it before."

"Neither have I." And, to the Venusian: "Get one of the Daus in here. Maybe he'll recognize it."

A minute later one of the natives of Tela was beside them.

"Yes," he agreed after a moment's scrutiny, "I have seen such ships before. But it is old. Very old. It is one of those my people used before the Lundar conquest, powered by atomic energy."

Eyes narrowed, Wolf stared at the image of the approaching ship. It was limping along slowly, a far cry from the swift, efficient vessels of the Lundars, let alone the *Ghost*.

"There's nothing to do but let it come," he decided finally. "But we'll keep it covered every inch of the way. At the first sign of trouble—we drop it."

Slowly, the ship hovering above Ra came closer and closer, lumbering laboriously onward toward the face of the planet. On the ground, the *Ghost's* crew and the freed slaves waited on the alert, tensely expectant.

"Watch it, men!" Wolf rapped, his blue eyes glued to the now-visible space ship. "We're taking no more chances than we have to. If you see anything suspicious, fire at will!"

Still nothing untoward happened. The ship settled clumsily. Maneuvered for a favorable position. At last landed with a thump in a valley between two of the great slag piles.

One of the *Ghost's* buccaneers, an Earthman, started to approach it.

"Back!" roared Wolf. "Wait 'til they open up!"

As if prompted by his words, the forward hatchway of the ship swung outward. A familiar figure appeared.

"Orcutt!"

"YES. Orcutt!" The young Dau swung to the ground. His broad face was gaunt. Great, dark hollows shadowed his eyes. He stumbled as he came forward to meet the raiders. Wolf caught his arm.

"Orcutt! What is it? Tell me!"

"It's . . . Meersa."

"Meersa! What's happened to her?"

"The Lundars . . . they've got her."

"The Lundars!"

"Znz has her. He captured her on Suorz."

Wolf's bronzed face was nearly as pale as that of the Dau princess' aide.

"Start at the beginning," he commanded sharply. "Tell me exactly what happened."

"Well . . . I went to Suorz in the torpedo ship, just as I'd planned to. And I even found Meersa. She was all right, just as you said she'd be.

"We went in our ships to the Dau colony on Suorz. I could not quite convince Meersa that you did not mean to betray her. She wanted to stir up a revolt in the colony, drive the Lundar garrison off the planet. That's how we happened to fix up this ship." He jerked his head in the direction of the vessel in which he had come.

"Yes. But go on. How'd the Lundars happen to capture you?"

"It was Znz. You had hardly left your asteroid base for the raid on Ra,

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Wolf Stone, when he appeared. Already he was betraying you, even before—"

"I can imagine that without any trouble. But what about Meersa?"

The young Dau tried to force a smile; failed miserably.

"Znz' men were wearing the flying suits the Lundars used for short trips before they got Ra's power," he continued. "They came down on us one night while Meersa and I were reconnoitering in space between Suorz and the asteroid. We were in our torpedo ships. We each had a helper from the Dau colony—only one, though; those little ships will accommodate only two men."

"But what about the Lundars?"

"They came upon us suddenly. Their bodies, in the flying suits, were as long as our ships. They threatened us, by gestures, that they would burn open our cockpits unless we obeyed them. That would have meant instant death, so we were forced to go with them to where a Lundar cruiser was stationed. Znz, also, was there. He told us he had sent you to your destruction, and that he intended to keep us prisoners.

"Then the power went off. When it did not come back on, Znz was furious. I knew then that you had not been killed—that somehow you had captured Ra. So when a chance came for me to escape, I took it, even though I was not able to save Meersa. I went to the Dau colony and got this old freighter and a crew. We came here at top speed, hoping you could somehow save Meersa."

"With Znz stranded on Suorz?" Wolf smiled grimly. "I wouldn't be surprised if I could, Orcutt. We've got the *Ghost* nearly ready to fly again—"

"But Znz is not stranded" the young Dau broke in excitedly.

"HE'S not stranded? What do you mean?"

"Did I not tell you? The cruiser he came to Suorz in was equipped for flight without the broadcast power. Even before I escaped, he was making his plans to leave for Virna, the home planet of the Lundars. His cruiser took off but a few hours before we did—"

"Virna!" Wolf's face was pale again as he exploded the name. "If he ever gets there, there's no chance at all of rescuing Meersa. It's beyond the realm of possibility that we could invade the Lundars' own planet and still save her alive."

"Of course. But could you not catch his cruiser before he reaches Virna? The *Ghost* is fast, and, without broadcast power, Znz' own ship is even slower than the one in which I came here—"

"It wouldn't do any good. He'd put in at Tela, instead, if he saw we were going to catch him."

"But he cannot put in at Tela!" Orcutt cried excitedly. "There his revolt failed, and Rsk is still in control. It would be as much as his life was worth to land there!"

There was a gleam of excitement in Wolf's eyes, too, now.

"Maybe we can make it, then," he snapped. "Virna's a long way from Suorz." He turned. "Moko!"

The little Uranian stepped forward. "Yes, yes?"

"Give us some fast calculations. Can we catch Znz before he gets to Virna?"

The scientist whipped out a scratch-pad. "Have to figure distance—speed—route," he chattered, and began firing questions at Orcutt.

For nearly a minute, then, he calculated and checked. At last he glanced up.

"No. Can't be done. You'd be two

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days late. Maybe more. *Ghost's* not ready to blast off, anyhow—"

"But there must be some way—"

"Maybe. But I don't know it. Have to go faster than any ship I've ever seen."

The pirate commander turned on his heel. "Come on, Orcutt. You, too, Ivar. I've got some thinking to do."

Two hours later, he was still racking his brain for a way out. For the fiftieth time he halted in front of the great celestial chart which hung on the wall of the *Ghost's* control room.

"There must be a way!" he fumed. "There's always a way—"

"—if you can find it," grunted Ivar dourly. "Yeah, you've said that a million times, Chief. But this time there just ain't none. Not unless you can rock this whole damned chunk of mud off its orbit on a special trip to Virna—"

The lean Earthman stopped dead in his tracks.

"That's it!" he exclaimed.

"Huh? What you saying, Chief? What is it?"

"You hit it, Ivar! You called the turn!" And, to Orcutt: "Get Moko! Quick! Every minute counts now!"

THE young Dau dashed out. Seconds later he was back, dragging with him the sputtering little Uranian.

"Get your hands off me, you *podor!*" screamed the purple-bearded scientist, struggling to escape. "Let me alone—!"

"Moko!"

The Uranian stopped short in his tirade, caught by the bite of Wolf Stone's voice.

"Yes, yes?"

"Moko, Znz isn't going to get to Virna!" he blazed. "We're going to beat him to the draw—"

"Have to show me—"

"I will. Moko, we're going to knock Virna out of the sky!"

"What?"

"You said this planet is practically a solid lump of radioactive ore, didn't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"All right, then!" There was a triumphant fire in the Earthman's cold blue eyes. "We're going to throw Ra at Virna, faster than any missile ever went before. So fast that it'll hit Virna before Znz' cruiser can possibly get there—"

"But—how—you can't—no—it isn't possible—"

"It is possible. Look here." Wolf's lean forefinger traced a course across the celestial chart. "See, Znz won't ever pass between Ra and Virna, so we don't need to worry about that angle."

"But you cannot move a planet from its orbit—"

"We can this one." The buccaneer chief's face was flushed with sudden enthusiasm. The cords of his neck were taut with excitement.

"Don't you see?" he rushed on. "Ra is one big lump of radioactivity—of energy, waiting to be released. If we let enough of that power go, and in the right direction, we'll blast Ra through space like a comet with an automatic pilot—"

"But how? Can't control it—can't—"

"Yes. We can. At least, we can if you were right about the energy being released through electrolysis."

"Of course I was right!" the little scientist bristled.

"All right, then. First, you'll have to calculate the angle of approach, and all—you know, just how to aim Ra in order to hit Virna—"

"Yes. Yes. Go on." The Uranian's eyes were bright with interest.

"Then we'll put two of the old freighters the Lundars left here out in

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space. We'll anchor them exactly according to your calculations. Then, by passing a powerful bolt of electricity between them, we'll electrolyze one whole side of the planet."

"You mean touch the whole works off like a skyrocket, Chief?" burst out Ivar in stark, staring amazement. "Blow it all the way across the solar system, and into Virna—"

"Yes. That's it. Exactly."

"NO. You can't." It was Moko. He shook his head vigorously. "No. Not enough power. Where could you get a bolt that strong?"

"From Ra."

"What?"

"From Ra." Wolf's eyes were gleaming. "Don't you see? This planet has been supplying a whole universe with power. Can you imagine what that would mean, if we threw the broadcast system on full force, and all channeled into one great bolt, passing between those two freighters—?"

A look of awe transfused the scientist's purple-bearded face.

"Wolf Stone," he whispered, "you are mad. But also, I think, you are a genius. Your plan is insane, but it might work. We shall try it!"

Every man who could lift a hand worked in the mad hours that followed. In minutes, almost, the *Ghost's* repairs were completed, and the great raider ship was ready to take the air. The former Lundar slaves were loaded onto the freighters captured in the occupation of Ra and sent far out into space, to give them time to put sufficient distance between themselves and the doomed power planet.

The raiders, meanwhile, equipped two of the freighters with the electrical apparatus necessary for them to serve as the poles in the great experiment. Ra's power broadcasting system was changed to allow completely automatic operation.

At last Moko the Uranian came out of his quarters.

"The figures," he told Wolf. "All checked. Ready to go. Here"—he shoved forward a slip of paper—"positions for the freighters. Go ahead. Any time you say."

"Right." The raider chief roared orders, watched the two-pole vessels rumble aloft.

A last-minute check-up. Then:

"Prepare to blast off. We pick up the men on the freighters, then head for outer space."

The jerk of the take-off came and went. The slowing to allow the men delegated to placing the freighters to come back aboard the *Ghost*. The long run to a safe position. And then—

"Are we ready?"

Little Moko checked a chronometer.

"Another minute and the position will be exactly right for intercepting Virna's orbit," he said. "Everything's automatic. We don't do anything."

Silence. Tense, pregnant silence. With every eye focussed on the telescreen, where the image of Ra hung centered and motionless.

Baroom!

Even here, a thousand miles out in space, they could feel the concussion. One side of Ra suddenly glowed red, then white, in the telescreen. The next instant the power planet was moving. Leaving its orbit. Slashing a new path across the void. Gaining speed. Faster, faster, faster, with flame seething in its wake like the blast from a rocket's tail.

"It is going!" whispered Orcutt, the Dau, his voice shaking.

On and on it went, out through the eternal night of interstellar space. On and on, toward Virna, drawn there like a needle to a magnet.

"Full speed ahead," commanded

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Wolf Stone. "We've still got to find Znz."

"Full speed ahead!" echoed Ivar thunderously. "Get moving, you lugs! The chief says blast!"

THREE days later the pin-point of light that was Virna suddenly leaped to match-head size. An instant later it went out entirely.

"They're gone!" choked Orcutt, the Dau, tautly. "The Lundars' home planet is gone!"

But it remained for the strange little Uranian scientist, Moko, a life-long enemy of totalitarianism, to carve the epitaph.

Succinctly, he said:

"One less dictatorship."

CHAPTER VII

Trouble on Tela

THEY came at last to Suorz, and asked at the Dau colony whether Znz and his Lundar cruiser had returned there.

The answer was in the negative.

"Where could that devil have gone to?" Wolf demanded savagely, pacing the floor of his cabin aboard the *Ghost*. "No one can vanish completely. Not even out in the void."

"Chief," interrupted Ivar hesitantly, "ain't there one chance you ain't thought of?"

"Such as?"

"Ra, Chief."

Across the room, Orcutt shuddered. Wolf glared at his mate.

"It's a physical impossibility," he snapped. "Even if he'd wanted to, and tried to, Znz couldn't have gotten his vessel to a point where it could have been hit. If I'd thought he could, with Meersa on board as she was, I'd have never considered the idea."

Moko chimed in: "I agree. I checked that course. Not a chance of Znz hitting or being hit." A pause. "Lots of asteroids around, anyhow. Znz could be there. Might have stopped off anywhere."

"But what are we going to do?" demanded Orcutt, licking his pale lips in worried fashion. "We cannot search every asteroid. It would take forever—"

"We won't have to." Wolf was suddenly decisive. "In all this talk about Znz hiding on an asteroid, we're all forgetting that the average asteriod is a pretty barren spot, incapable of supporting life."

"You mean that we should search only some of the asteroids—?"

"No. It would be a waste of time to search any of them. Stop and consider: if you were Znz, what would you do?"

Ivar snorted. "Huh! That's easy. Blow my head off with a ray gun before you catched up to me, that's what I'd do. And so would anyone else with a brain above an amoeba."

"Hmmm . . ." Moko considered. "With Ra and Virna both destroyed, 's not much left. Just Tela and Suorz. Not on Suorz, either. That leaves Tela . . ."

"It could not be Tela," Orcutt moped tonelessly. "Znz and Rsk now are deadly enemies because of Znz' revolt. Znz could not go there—"

"But emergencies make strange bedfellows," cut in Wolf grimly. "Anyhow, I'm wondering if the destruction of Virna wouldn't be just enough to bring those two cutthroats together again."

THE young Dau still shook his head. "It is too much to believe," he said. "Besides, if Meersa is on Tela, and in the hands of the Lundars there, she

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might as well be dead. No one could help her—"

"Still and all, we're going to have a try at it."

"What—" The princess' stocky aide jerked alert.

"Yes." Wolf nodded. "Better to do something, and have it the wrong thing, than to grow old waiting but accomplishing nothing."

"But how—"

"The *Ghost's* in the best of shape. We'll try a little raiding."

A lumbering Lundar freighter of the type used before the advent of Ra's power became the buccaneers' victim. It was just leaving Tela for Suorz when they struck. Two Saturnians dragged its captain before Wolf Stone.

"Who's ruling Tela?" the pirate chief demanded, his blue eyes looking straight into the Lundar's red orbs. "Is it Rsk or Znz?"

For a moment the captive hesitated, then decided it would be best to answer.

"It is as before," he said at last in a surly tone. "Rsk is gar, Znz sub-gar. After the revolt, Rsk would have killed Znz—in fact, he went so far as to put a price on his head. But when Virna was destroyed, and Ra with it, he thought better of it and allowed Znz to return, so that you might not destroy them separately."

Wolf glanced over at Orcutt and Ivar. "See?" he cried triumphantly. "What did I tell you?"

And then, to the Lundar captain:

"What happened to the Princess Meersa? Where's she?"

The other shrugged his great shoulders. "I do not know. Who cares what happens to the women of a subject race?"

At that, Orcutt sprang forward, but Ivar—at a gesture from Wolf—held him back.

"Why waste your energy?" the spaceman said. "We have more important work to do."

The young Dau sagged back, eyes still smouldering.

"But what can we do?" he asked hopelessly. "You have worked miracles, Wolf Stone. But even you cannot hope to attack Tela with one space ship."

A thin smile lit up the Earthman's face. He motioned the Saturnians to drag the Lundar out. Then he crossed the cabin to where Orcutt had slumped down. He gripped the stocky youth's shoulder.

"Sometimes, Orcutt," he declared quietly, "a frontal attack is not the best policy."

The other did not answer.

"This is one of them," Wolf went on. "I think it's fairly reasonable to believe that Meersa is somewhere on Tela. Certainly they wouldn't kill her just for the fun of it—"

A VENUSIAN burst in.

"A small space ship is coming out from Tela, my commander," he announced. "Shall we seize it?"

Wolf nodded. "Might as well. Now that the Lundars haven't got Ra's power, we can outrun them every time."

The Venusian grinned. "It will not be hard this time, my commander, for this craft has seen us, yet does not flee."

"They're not r u n n i n g?" Wolf frowned. "I don't like the sound of that. That smells like a trap."

Together, the little group hurried to the telescreen.

"Look at the way they are maneuvering!" cried Orcutt. "They are asking that we parley."

"Yes." Wolf turned to the navigator-pilot. "Let them come alongside. But watch out for tricks."

A few moments later, not a Lundar, but a Dau, came aboard through the

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Ghost's airlock.

"Niker!" cried Orcutt.

The other nodded. "Yes, Orcutt. It is I. Though when I consider my mission, I am ashamed to confess it."

"Your mission? What do you mean, my good friend?"

"You know that Rsk and Znz again rule Tela together?"

"Yes. Of course."

"I come as their messenger, Orcutt."

"You! Their messenger!"

Niker smiled sadly. "Yes, Orcutt. I have no choice but to do as they tell me. The lives of my wife and children hang in the balance."

"Of course. I should have known." Orcutt patted the other's shoulder in consolation. Then: "But what message do you bring, Niker?"

"Our princess, Meersa, is a prisoner, Orcutt."

"Then they *have* got her!"

"Yes—"

Anguish flooded Orcutt's face. He interrupted: "What is it they plan to do with her? Quick, Niker! Tell me!"

"Orcutt, it breaks my heart to tell you, but—they say you raiders must leave the solar system forever. If you agree, Princess Meersa will be allowed to live out her life as a prisoner. She will never be free, but she will be kindly treated and made as happy as possible."

"And if we do not leave?"

"You remember the great zoo?"

"Yes. Of course."

"And the quirsts of Suorz? The small, poisonous snakes with arms?"

"Yes."

"If you do not leave, Orcutt, Meersa will be thrown into their cage at the zoo. She will die the awful, lingering death their fangs bring."

"No! It can't be! Not even the Lundars would do a thing so horrible—"

"It is what they threaten, Orcutt. They give you but twenty-four hours to decide. At the end of that time I am to be returned with your sworn promise to leave, and with that of Wolf Stone. And by the time my little ship reaches the great central port, this vessel, the *Ghost*, must already be on its way out into the void, leaving this solar system forever."

THE shoulders of Orcutt the Dau slumped hopelessly. His broad face was suddenly haggard. When he spoke, it was in the low stumbling monotone of a broken man.

"There is no need to wait twenty-four hours for our answer," he said. "There can be but one decision. We shall leave, Niker. Now. Meersa—"

"No!"

The savage intensity of Wolf Stone's voice brought both Daus up short. They spun to face the raider chief.

All through their discussion, he had leaned silently against the cabin wall. Now he stood clear, feet wide apart, back stiff and unbending, head thrust forward just a trifle with the very fierceness of his emotion. His thumbs were thrust into the broad *yako*-leather belt that girded his waist. Coal-black hair awry, blue eyes chill with menace against the bronzed background of his lean hard face, he looked his name—savage and dangerous and cunning as a gaunt old timber wolf; hard and unyielding as the very rock of ages.

"No!" he repeated. "We don't leave, now or ever, until we're ready to go."

"But Meersa—" choked Orcutt.

The Earthman turned on him with all the ferocity of a wounded tiger.

"Do you think Wolf Stone's promise means nothing?"

"Your promise?"

"The day that Meersa saved my life, I swore to her that I'd see her enemies in hell. The least I can do is to die

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trying to put them there."

"But Meersa!" the young Dau whispered again. "Do you not see, Wolf? Were we to attack, she would die a death worse than any you can imagine. We cannot risk it—"

"Do you know this Niker well? Do you trust him?"

Orcutt nodded. "With my life," he said simply. "He is one of my oldest friends. And of Meersa's."

Wolf turned on Niker.

"Do you know that the Lundars have the princess a prisoner?" he demanded.

"I have seen her. I have talked with her."

"All right, then. Come on, Orcutt. We've got to work fast."

"But what can we do—"

"We've got twenty-four hours, haven't we? Empires have fallen in less than that."

Orcutt remained unconvinced. "We cannot attack Tela," he said. "The sheer force of numbers would overwhelm even your crew, Wolf."

"If we attacked openly. Which we shan't do."

"What do you mean?"

"There are times for force, and there are times for strategy. This, I think, is a time for strategy."

ORCUTT shook his head in bewilderment. "I do not understand," he confessed.

"It's pretty obvious, isn't it, that we can't just dive the *Ghost* down on Tela?"

"Yes."

"So we have to figure out another way of fighting. Something that the Lundars can't imagine happening." A pause. "What do you figure they'd least expect, Orcutt?"

The young Dau frowned, then shook his head. "There is nothing we could do that they would not be prepared for, Wolf Stone," he said at last.

A tight grin passed over the Earthman's face.

"I think there is, Orcutt," he declared. "I think there is something so utterly absurd that no Lundar would dream of it happening."

"What is it?"

Again the raider chief grinned.

"I, personally, am going to invade Tela," he announced.

"You mean—"

"I mean that instead of trying to attack the planet openly, I'm going to sneak down in a torpedo ship. I'm going to prowl around a bit and see if I can't dope out a way to get Meersa away from the Lundars. After that we can work on the problem of breaking their control over the planet."

Stark amazement, then new hope, leaped into Orcutt's eyes.

"I shall come with you!" he cried excitedly.

"It would seem like a good idea. You know your way around Tela, and I don't. It would help a lot to have you around."

"Me, too, chief!" grunted Ivar from the background.

Wolf shook his head. "Sorry, Ivar. No dice."

"Huh?" The big Jupiterian peered at the buccaneer leader as if unable to believe his ears. "I don't get it, chief. You ain't got no idea of leaving me here, have you?"

"I'm afraid so, Ivar."

"But—"

"It's got to be that way. In the first place, the torpedo ships carry only two people. In the second, we need someone competent to stay in command of the *Ghost*. Third, there's no disguise in the universe that could make you pass as someone who belonged on Tela; because neither Daus, Lundars, nor Bans have four arms and one eye."

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"You'll need help, though, chief. You got to have—"

"If two can't do the job, neither can three, Ivar. No, I'm afraid you'll have to let Orcutt and me handle this assignment."

Orcutt interrupted: "When do we leave?"

"Just as soon as we can get ready. Which should take about fifteen minutes. We've got to work fast."

SOMETHING besides night fell on Tela that evening. For with the dusk, the slim, sinister form of a torpedo ship settled silently to the planet's surface, on that edge of the badlands lying closest to the great capitol city.

"The first thing we must do is to procure Dau clothing for ourselves, and cosmetics with which to whiten your skin." Orcutt explained to Wolf as they climbed out of their tiny craft. "Only then will it be safe to begin our search."

"Right," agreed the Earthman. "Well, let's get going."

"It will be difficult," his companion confessed. "I do not know quite how we can obtain garments."

Wolf grinned. "Where can we find a Dau or two?" he asked. "I'll demonstrate for you."

They had been walking as they talked. Now they found themselves entering the outermost suburb. Ahead of them a Dau hurried toward a ramshackle hovel.

"There's a Dau now!" exclaimed the Earthman.

"Oh, my poor people!" choked Orcutt. He jerked his head toward the shanties. "See how the Lundars force them to live!"

"Come on!" snapped Wolf, breaking into a swift, silent run. "This isn't any time to talk sociology. We've got too much to do."

"What . . ." Orcutt began.

"Shhh!"

On they sped. Then the Dau on the street ahead caught the whisper of their footsteps. He started to turn.

Wolf launched himself through the air like a veritable human projectile. His shoulder crashed into the Dau's legs below the knee in a perfect tackle. The man went down, his shocked cry still sticking in his throat. The next instant the Earthman's fist drove home on the Dau's jaw with a meaty *thunk!*

"O. K.," Wolf clipped. "Get 'em off him. Hurry up!"

"But he is of my people! We cannot rob—"

"Do you think this is a good time for a shopping expedition? We've got work to do! Hurry up!"

Orcutt hastily obeyed, while the Dau whom Wolf had downed groaningly stirred in his coma. A moment later the two adventurers were gone, leaving a shivering, swearing, half-stunned —and definitely naked—victim behind them.

A few minutes later they repeated the process, then held up a shop handling cosmetics to obtain some of the thick, white cream used by Dau women to cover complexion blemishes.

Wolf smeared it on in a nearby alley.

"Now," he announced grimly, "we're ready to start work in earnest. Where's Meersa likely to be?"

His companion meditated for a moment.

"Now that Ra has been destroyed, I do not believe she would be held in the prison we were in formerly," he said finally. "Instead, they probably would have placed her in one of the jails reserved for minor offenders." A pause. "But then they may be keeping her in the Lundar headquarters, or some similar place."

"Is there any way you can find out

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definitely?"

"No. I know of none. I asked Niker — who certainly should have known, more than anyone else—and he told me that her hiding-place was being kept a secret by the Lundars to discourage any rescue attempt by our people." The young Dau's face grew gloomy again. "You see we have little chance. The Lundars have done their work well. They are taking no chances on escape this time."

FOR a long moment Wolf Stone stood silent. Then:

"What jail would they probably have her in if they were keeping her in one?"

"The central one. It is in the great Tribunal Hall, where you were brought before Rsk."

"Good." A pause. "What do Daus get put in jail for? Small offenses, that is."

Looking somewhat puzzled, Orcutt answered: "The most common offense is drunkenness. All too many of my people have a taste for *apolosa*."

"Where can we get some?"

"At any store."

"Then come on. Let's buy some."

"Wait." Orcutt held the Earthman back. "What is it you plan?"

Wolf grinned. "Apparently the only way to find Meersa is to get thrown in jail ourselves. Yet we don't want to be pinched on a serious charge, because that would bring too much investigation and questioning. So I figured a nice, noisy apolosa drunk would do the job."

"But after we are in, we cannot get out!" the stocky Dau protested. "We should have to throw our ray guns away or they would be found when we were searched—"

"Uh-uh." Wolf shook his head. "In the first place, I've been in jail on many a planet, and I've never seen one where a drunk gets searched very thoroughly. Besides, we're going to hide our guns like this—" Raising the flowing, robe-like Dau garment which he wore, he strapped his heavy pistol high between his legs. "That'll pass anything but a complete strip," he explained. "Fix yours the same way."

An hour later the pair was lurching solemnly along the street on which the Tribunal Hall fronted. Wolf carried a big apolosa bottle in his hand.

"Remember, you do the talking," he hissed in last-minute instruction. "My accent isn't any too hot."

Orcutt, the Dau, nodded.

The next instant they came abreast the two giant Lundars who guarded the entrance to the building.

Wolf reared back and stared up at them, beautifully and belligerently drunk. He was a sight to behold. Mud smeared his face and his clothes. Saliva trickled from the corners of his loosely-held lips, to join streams on his chin and thence drip to the ground. A strong aura of apolosa hung about him.

"Go on, now!" one of the guards growled. "Get moving, you drunken scum."

Very deliberately the disguised Earthman spat squarely between the Lundar's feet.

"Why, you—!" The guard started forward, his red eyes glaring.

"You le' my frien' 'lone!" burbled Orcutt soddenly.

The other guard intervened.

"They're drunk," he soothed his comrade. "They don't know what they're doing."

"Well"—the first guard hesitated, caught between two fires—"well, I ought to throw them in. Drunken Daus! They're worse riff-raff than the Bans."

"Who you 'sultin'?" screamed Or-

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cutt angrily.

"Yeah!" roared Wolf. He hurled his empty apolosa bottle at the head of the guard who had tried to act as peacemaker.

The guard ducked. "Why, you scum!" he yelped, as the container whistled past his ear. "You want trouble, do you! Well, you'll get it! We'll see how you like spending a few days in jail!"

Suiting his actions to his word, he sprang forward, caught Wolf firmly by the collar and dragged him into the hall. His partner, hauling Orcutt, came close at his heels.

CHAPTER VIII

Quirsts Must Eat

AS WOLF had predicted, the search made of the prisoners was definitely on the superficial side. A burly Lundar sergeant heard the guards' complaints, then promptly consigned the Earthman and his companion to a week in jail. Turned over to another guard, the two were herded down a long corridor toward Tela's equivalent of a drunk tank.

"That door!" Orcutt whispered as the Lundar hurried them along the passageway. He nodded to indicate an impressively solid panel set in the right-hand wall of the hall. "If Meersa's here, she will be on the level to which it leads."

The other gave a great sigh. His legs buckled under him. His muscles no longer functioned. He sprawled on the floor, a sodden heap.

Lipping an oath, the Lundar bent down to pull the disguised Earthman erect. But his hand never touched the prisoner's shoulder.

Instead, Wolf rolled over. His ray gun was in his hand, his eyes suddenly very cold and blue and sober. He thrust the weapon's muzzle against the guard's chest.

"There's a door we want opened," he snapped. "Get moving, if you want to live!"

Close beside him, Orcutt—his gun also now drawn—forced the Lundar back. Together, the two adventurers pressed toward the door.

It was locked.

"Blast it!" Wolf commanded.

Orcutt triggered his ray-gun at the lock, while the buccaneer chief continued to keep the guard covered.

"Wolf! It's broken!"

For the barest fraction of a second, the Earthman's eyes flashed to Orcutt and the now-open door.

"Look out!"

The panic in the stocky Dau's voice sent Wolf swiveling back to the guard like an animated gun-turret, every muscle tense, every nerve on edge.

The Lundar had taken advantage of that momentary break in the raider's attention. He was lunging forward, great arms swinging. His red eyes were like pools of blood.

"Stop! You fool!"

On the Lundar came. His ten-inch fingers clutched hungrily for the space pirate's throat.

The Earthman dropped to one knee. His lean face was grim. His finger tightened on the ray gun's trigger.

The Lundar stopped in mid-strike. His face contorted with sudden shock and pain. The breath went out of him in a rush. He pitched forward, onto his face. Wolf jumped aside barely in time to avoid the monster's falling body.

"Wolf! Did he hurt you?"

The raider chief shook his head.

"No," he answered, "but he's messed things up. Now we'll have to work fast."

"What do you mean?"

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"Isn't it pretty obvious? If we could have kept him alive, we could have made him go with us. As it is, the minute his body's discovered, the hunt for us will be on."

"YES. I see. What shall we do with him?"

Wolf glanced about. Then:

"There's no place in this corridor to hide him. The only thing we can do is to drag him through this door you just opened. Then we'll shut it and pray that no one has cause to use it. Hurry!"

Together, the pair somehow hauled the Lundar's corpse through the doorway. The portal was at the foot of a stairway. To get the unbelievably heavy body far enough up the steps so that they could close the door at first seemed an impossibility. But at last, straining and tugging, they managed to drag the dead guard inside.

"All right. That's done. Now we've got to rush!"

They sprinted up the stairs. Blasted open another door, at the head, and hurried down a corridor similar to the one below.

"The more important prisoners are on this level," Orcutt explained between gasps as they ran onward. "If Princess Meersa is in the central jail, this is where she should be."

Another door loomed, solid save for a small grated opening near its top.

The young Dau caught Wolf's arm.

"Beyond are cells," he whispered. "In the center corridor a guard is usually stationed."

Wolf glanced up at the portal. Like all the others it was solidly built, and on such a scale as to permit its use by the twelve-foot Lundars.

"That's bad," he clipped. "By the time we could smash that lock with our rayguns, the guard inside would be ready to give us a warm reception."

"If he were alive, no doubt he would," Orcutt retorted grimly. "Give me a leg up, Wolf Stone."

The other eyed him. "You mean to kill him?" he asked.

Orcutt nodded. "Yes. I do not like killing. Not even of Lundars. But when my princess is in danger, it becomes necessary." And then, his face strained: "Come! Help me up! We must hurry."

Wolf lifted him until he could sight his ray gun through the grating. Grimly the young Dau brought the weapon level; squeezed the trigger.

The thud of his feet as he jumped down was echoed by the dull thump of a heavy body falling. A moment later the pair had blasted the lock loose. They hurried into the cell block.

In the center of the floor lay the crumpled form of a dead Lundar guard, while from both sides of the room Daus stared out of their cramped cells at the newcomers. They greeted Orcutt with a chorus of low, joyful cries.

He silenced them with a gesture.

"Where is the Princess Meersa?" he demanded.

FOR a long moment silence hung heavy over the imprisoned natives of Tela. But at last one wrinkled aged Dau broke the tension.

"She is . . . in the tower, Orcutt," he reported in a tone of mourning.

"In the tower!"

The others hung their heads in silent confirmation.

Orcutt's face was terrible to see.

"They have put her in the tower, Wolf!" he cried, as if the other had not heard.

"I got that. But I don't understand what it means. What is the tower?"

"No. You would not know." The stocky Dau licked his lips feverishly. "You see, Wolf Stone, the Lundar gars

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must be amused . . . amused by the women of Tela!"

"What?" The Earthman's face showed incredulity. "That doesn't seem possible, Orcutt. After all, the Lundars are twelve feet tall—"

"No, no. You do not understand. The Lundars are not as we; they are themselves sexless. But it pleases them to give Dau girls to the males of other races—the Ban primitives of Suorz, the Ios of the far asteroids. The horror, the struggles, of our women amuse them, then—"

"The damned degenerated, sadistic *gratchs!*" grated Wolf. "I've seen every corner of two solar systems, but never have I heard the like of that!"

He turned on the wrinkled Dau who had told them Meersa was in the tower.

"When did they take her?"

"Only this evening, I believe," came the answer. "Our guard taunted us with it when he came on duty."

Wolf's eyes flashed. "Then there's a good chance we can reach her before . . . anything happens," he snapped. Then, to Orcutt: "How do we get to the tower?"

"There is a lift—what you call an elevator."

"Then let's go!"

"Do not leave us!" cried one of the Daus. "Free us first."

Already moving, the Earthman paused. He tossed his ray gun to the man who had spoken.

"You can burn your way out with this," he clipped. "Don't try to follow us. It's every man for himself now."

Then he and Orcutt were running full-tilt down another corridor.

"The lift is close by here," the young Dau panted. "We must be careful. It is well-guarded."

They rounded a corner—and ran straight into three Lundar guards grouped about the entrance to the monster elevator.

Wolf—unarmed now—hurled himself at the first of the ogrish creatures. The Lundar was standing with his back to the Earthman. Wolf's shoulder crashed into the back of the giant's knees.

The guard sprawled, his legs knocked from under him. His body toppled in front of the second Lundar, now turning to face the attack; sent him, too, staggering. The pair collapsed to the floor in a threshing tangle of huge arms and legs.

But the third giant jumped free. His great red eyes flared as he took in the situation. His hand flashed toward the light gun at his hip.

ORCUTT—spraddle-legged, his stocky body twisted sidewise as he braked himself to a sliding halt—already was bringing up his ray gun. He triggered a spray of death square into the Lundar's face. Watched the giant's jaw sag, his body crumple.

But even as he saw the first enemy go down, he was spinning to face the menace of the other two Lundars.

Wolf was rolling free of the struggling pair on the floor. Somehow, in the chaos, his fingers had clutched a Lundar light gun. Already he was blasting the purple bolts into them.

One of the creatures went limp. The other tried to tear free.

Orcutt's ray gun nailed him through the throat before he could so much as get his feet under him.

Wolf staggered erect. He thrust the light gun he had used into his belt, then fumbled for another among the corpses.

"That was close!" he said. The light of reckless battle was shining in his eyes.

Orcutt nodded. "Yes. But what now?"

"The elevator—can we get it?"

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"Yes. These buttons—" The Dau indicated a panel of vari-colored buzzers.

"Get one."

The Dau moved to obey. But before he could reach the panel, the great doors swung back. A Lundar operator gaped out at them.

Wolf and Orcutt fired as one. The giant in the car slammed back against the rear wall, dead before he hit it.

"The Lundars must have rung for him before we came!" breathed Orcutt.

"Yes. Come on." Wolf stepped into the car.

"But what about the bodies?"

"Bodies!" Wolf snarled the word as if it were a curse. "Bodies! Bodies! More bodies! Yes, we'll have to take care of 'em. We've got to stall off pursuit as long as possible."

"Could we perhaps place all of them in the elevator?"

"No. That wouldn't help any." The Earthman stood tense, eyes probing every niche and cranny of the corridor. Then: "Will the elevator work with the doors open?"

"Perhaps. We could try."

A few seconds of frantic experiment revealed that they could hold the car's doors open, yet still raise it a couple of feet above floor level.

"Down the shaft with 'em!" grated the raider chief. "They won't find 'em there for hours."

In less than a minute, the corpses of the Lundars were hurtling into the depths.

Scrambling into the car and closing the doors, Wolf and Orcutt sped upward. At last a flashing light indicated that they had reached the top floor.

"There will be guards here!" warned the young Dau as he gripped the door lever. "We must be ready."

Wolf whipped out the two light guns he had taken from the dead giants. His lean face was hard, his chill eyes filled with menace.

"Let's go!" he clipped.

THE doors swung open.

Two guards spun to face the raiders.

The Earthman's guns belched purple light. The Lundars died.

Together, Wolf and Orcutt sprang from the elevator, half-expecting more trouble from some new angle. But they found no signs of life.

"This is the tower," explained the Dau. "Somewhere on this level we should find Meersa, if she remains alive."

They hurried through one empty room after another. Then, just as the awful qualms of defeat were rising in their hearts, they came upon a locked door.

"Maybe this is it!" Wolf cried. "None of the others have been locked, if that means anything."

They blasted at the lock. Hurled themselves against the stubborn portal.

Suddenly, then, it gave. They plunged into the room beyond.

There, huddled in a sobbing heap on a great divan, lay the one they sought.

"Meersa!" cried Orcutt, springing to her side. He dropped to his knees beside the couch. "My darling, what have they done to you?"

The girl raised her tear-stained face. She stared at her aide. Then at the grim, silent figure of Wolf Stone, still standing in the doorway. Incredulity and joy mingled in her expression. She tried to speak, but her voice betrayed her. Laughing and sobbing at once, her arms sought the young Dau. But even as she clung to him, she gestured the Earthman closer also.

"Oh, my friends!" she gasped at last. "I had given up all hope. Until this evening, when the Lundars

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brought me here to the tower, I kept telling myself that somehow I would be saved. That you would find a way to rescue me.

"Then, quite early, the guards came and dragged me from my cell. They told me that it pleased Rsk to break my pride by giving me to an Io—an awful, slavering beast without a mind; a creature knowing naught but instinctive lust—"

"But they did not do it, Meersa. Tell me they did not do it," begged Orcutt.

The girl's hand caressed his shoulder. She smiled, a wistful tender smile.

"No, my faithful one, they did not do it," she reassured him. "Rsk must be busy, for they have not yet come for me."

She turned to the Earthman. Took his hands in hers.

"Forgive me, Wolf Stone, for doubting you," she begged, adoration shining in her eyes. "Never have I known a man like unto you. In our whole solar system there has never been such a one—"

The hint of a smile touched the adventurer's thin lips. The icy blue eyes softened just a little.

"I pledged my word I'd fight for you and protect you," he said, "and Wolf Stone's word is never broken."

Then:

"But this isn't the time to talk. We're not out of this mess yet—"

"I know." But Meersa's eyes were still on his, her hands still holding him. "I can hardly believe it," she whispered. "That two men could somehow fight their way to me—"

"Come on!" Wolf interrupted. "I'm sorry, Princess, but we've got to hurry."

And then from the doorway behind them, came a voice as cold and deadly as the clang of hell's own doors:

"No, do not hurry. First you must taste my hospitality!"

It was the voice of Rsk, gar of all the Lundars!

EVEN as he whirled, Wolf's hands flashed toward the guns hanging heavy in his belt. But he had forgotten that Meersa still clung to him. Her grip slowed him the fraction of a second in his draw.

Perhaps it was as well; had his guns come up he would have died where he stood. For Rsk stood squarely in the middle of the big doorway, and flanking him on either side was a Lundar guard with drawn light-gun.

Now they moved forward, and one of the guards relieved Wolf and Orcutt of their weapons, while the second kept the raiders and Meersa covered.

Another Lundar followed Rsk into the room. It was Znz, his pale, sinister face alight with evil joy.

"You should not have helped the Daus below to escape, Wolf Stone!" he gloated. "Like the clumsy fools they are, they stumbled into the hands of our guards before they had even gotten off their own levels. We knew without asking, then, where we could find you. Eh, Rsk?"

But the giant gar's original words apparently had exhausted his self-control. Now he was almost trembling with rage. His voice quavered with fury.

"You chitzas!" he raved. "You starbos! Once I said I'd make you pray for death. And now I will! The three of you together, I'll watch you die. Oh, what agonies you'll suffer—"

His hate was awful to behold. Meersa, her eyes wide with undisguised terror, clung to Orcutt. The young Dau, in turn, held her close to him. But his own face was taut with strain and he licked his dry lips nervously with the tip of his tongue.

Not Wolf Stone.

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Contemptuously the raider chief eyed the Lundar gar and sub-gar from head to toe. Not a sign of fear crept into the blue diamond chips that were his eyes. No tremor of panic racked his lean frame. He stood before them, reckless and defiant, with his thumbs hooked into the broad belt that girded in his flowing robe-like Dau garment, and a mocking, daredevil's smile twisting his mouth.

"You'll die a separate death for every Lundar who perished on Virna!" raged Rsk. "Yes, and on Ra, too!" A pause. Then: "Well, you chitza, do you fear to speak? Is your throat too dry with terror to give out words?"

Wolf laughed in his face.

"Do I look afraid?" he demanded with a sneer that sent the gar into new spasms of fury. "Do I look like the kind of a cowardly dog who'd crawl on his knees to you for mercy? So why should I give you the satisfaction of answering you?

"But one thing I'll tell you, Rsk. One piece of advice I'll give you: kill us now, while you've got the chance, if you want to live yourself.

"Once before you swore you'd kill me, but I got away. I wiped out two of your planets, and I set your puny, puling empire rocking on its heels.

"Give me another chance, and I'll knock it down around your ears like a glass house in an earthquake. I'll quit bothering with subordinates, and concentrate on killing you, yourself, Rsk, and that crawling traitor, Znz, that stands behind you—"

"I'll give you your chance to die!" screamed Rsk. "Right now, I'll give you your chance." And, to the guards: "Take him below! Take them all! To the zoo with them!"

Watchful and deadly, the guards herded the captives out of the room. Across the anteroom into the elevator.

TWENTY levels lower, they left the car again. Went down a corridor. Through the Tribunal Hall's vast museum wing. Past exhibits ranging from specimens of primitive Ban beadwork, to a huge, carefully insulated chunk of radioactive ore from the pits of Ra, to the delicate, beautiful products of skilled Dau metal workers.

And, at last, out of the museum and into the zoo, where the Lundars had gathered specimens of the wild life of every planet, every asteroid, in this entire solar system—*peens,* hideous, pterodactyl-like, with monstrous, bony wings; *gratchs,* blind, burrowing, mole-like; *yakos, stongs, jeors* . . .

But still the party continued. Past one cage after another. Until finally they reached a section where a strange stench assailed their nostrils. And there they stopped.

"Quirsts," choked Meersa in a voice that trembled with loathing.

"Quirsts!" echoed the gloating tones of Rsk.

The group was standing behind a railing. Ten feet beyond it were the bars of a cage. Straining his eyes, Wolf peered at the creatures within the den. When he saw them, his stomach nearly rose in revolt.

Nowhere in the length and breadth of two solar systems, had he seen the like. Hideous with warts and scales, these snake-like things had *arms!* Tiny, perfectly developed, almost human arms! They darted about their cage like flashes of light, glaring malevolently out at the intruders with beady reptilian eyes. Like every other creature in this strange solar system, their color was a fish-belly white, result of the sun's deficiency in various rays.

The Earthman fought down the nausea that swirled within him. When he spoke, his voice was steady.

"So these are quirsts!" he remarked

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interestedly. And, to the Lundars: "Just how are our fates linked with theirs?"

It was Znz who answered. His tone surged with triumph.

"Even quirsts must eat!" he said.

CHAPTER IX

Pirate Payoff

"THE quirst is poisonous," the sub-gar went on, gloatingly. "So poisonous that even their breaths can sometimes bring death. They will strike at any living thing, and without provocation. Paralysis is immediate, but death—a death in agony, I might add—is slow in coming. When you and your Dau friends are placed inside that cage, Wolf Stone"—he rubbed his hands together with unholy glee—"these creatures will swarm over you, clutching you, biting you, gnawing at you. They are hungry, Wolf Stone—"

"I've been bitten by snakes before," the Earthman retorted caustically, "but none as slimy as you, Znz. Now I'll have a chance to see if these quirsts you're so proud of can match you."

The sub-gar tensed at the jibe.

"You'll sing a different song when you face the quirsts!" he snarled. "You and this Orcutt and the tender Princess Meersa you're so fond of—"

"No!" cried Orcutt aloud. His whole body was shaking. "No! Not Meersa! Do what you want with us, Znz, but free Meersa—"

"Shut up!" slashed Wolf. "Would you crawl in front of these gorillas for any cause? We'll go, and we'll go together, and to hell with them, one and all!"

He vaulted the low rail that held visitors a safe distance from the cages. Meersa climbed after him, her lovely pale face as proudly defiant as his own. Orcutt brought up the rear.

"Good girl!" the raider chief muttered in Meersa's ear as he helped her over. And, to Orcutt: "On your toes! The cards aren't all down yet!"

Now one of the guards came forward. He had donned a strange garment resembling a flying suit. Moving up to the door of the cage, he grasped the lever.

"Come on!" he growled.

Never had Wolf Stone appeared more swaggering and defiant than at that moment. But there was a cold sheen of sweat over his forehead, and his mouth felt parched and cottony.

He approached the cage. Not a detail missed his cold-eyed scrutiny, and every impression was torn to frantic shreds by the fine mechanism of his brain as he searched past and present and future, and the whole universe, for even the slightest hope.

The quirsts, he noted, were only eight inches long, but they moved with a speed and deadliness that made the cobra's strike seem lackadaisical. The bars of their cage were covered with mesh netting in fine testimony to the creatures' dangerous character, while the door had a two-foot-high sill beneath it—complete with down-slanting guard spikes on the inside—to prevent their climbing out, even should the door itself accidentally be left open.

A sudden light gleamed in the adventurer's eyes. He bared his teeth in a savage grin.

"Why do you move so slowly, Wolf Stone?" jibed Znz.

"Yes!" taunted Rsk. "What's wrong, brave man? Get into the cage and die!"

The Lundar in the strange suit swung open the door of bars.

Wolf clenched his teeth. He could feel a rill of icy sweat go trickling down his back. Drawing a deep breath, breathing a silent prayer, he stepped

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toward the open door—and carefully stumbled over his own feet.

IT WAS well done. Rsk and Znz howled with ghoulish laughter. And Wolf careened violently into Meersa and Orcutt. The force of his blow shoved them sideways, toward the hinge side of the cage door.

Now he was ready. Now the stage was set. Wolf could feel the blood drain from his face. But he strode forward.

Then, so suddenly it was hard to follow, he struck.

Like lightning, he sprang behind the Lundar. His shoulder crashed into the giant's hip. At the same instant, his foot came down in front of those of the guard.

An ancient trick. But always a good one. The Lundar tripped. Pitched forward. Plunged headlong—under the directive and impetus of the raider's heave—over the doorsill and into the quirsts' cage.

Even as the Lundar toppled, Wolf sprang clear. In one wild leap he was across the falling giant's body. His arm caught Meersa and Orcutt. Slammed them back against the cage, close beside the door's hinges. Simultaneously he caught the locking lever. Swung the door wide open and on back, against the three of them, like a protective shield against the quirsts.

From beginning to end, the maneuver had taken less than three seconds. Seconds while Rsk and Znz and the second guard stood paralyzed with disbelief and shock.

But now, suddenly, they realized what the buccaneer chief had done—

Across the prone body of the fallen Lundar, sprawled over the doorsill, half in the cage and half out, the quirsts were leaping!

Over the human bridge they came, out of the cage and into the aisleway. Swarming, scurrying, squirming, in a torrent of sudden death.

Shrieking in panic, Rsk, Znz, and the guard fled, their prisoners forgotten. But not far. Nothing alive could outdistance those hideous, awful creatures that came after, tiny arms outstretched, in an insatiable kill-lust.

Gar, sub-gar, and guard—they went down almost together, the little Suorzian monsters nipping and clawing at their heels and legs. In less than half a minute their great bodies were mottled with the creatures.

Meersa buried her horror-distraught face against Orcutt's broad shoulder.

"Into the cage!" snapped Wolf. "It's empty now, but those devils will be back for us in a few seconds."

They clambered inside, the Earthman pausing barely long enough to snatch the light gun from the stunned Lundar whose body still lay sprawled across the doorsill.

"Now help me dump him outside," Wolf ordered. "His suit apparently protects him from the quirsts' bites."

A moment later, that job done, they swung the door closed.

And barely in time, too.

THE quirsts were coming back. Like foul figments of an evil imagination, they gathered around the cage, their beady little eyes gleaming with blood lust.

Even Wolf Stone shuddered.

"Here's hoping that story about even their breaths being poisonous is just superstition," he remarked.

Orcutt, staring out at the creatures in horrid fascination, nodded shakily and held Meersa the tighter.

"Yes," he agreed. "I, too, pray you are right." A pause. "But now, Wolf, how do we escape?"

"Have we but escaped one menace

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to be trapped by another?" echoed Meersa. "We cannot leave, or we will meet the fate of those . . . out there." Her eyes indicated the lumps of lifeless flesh that had been the Lundars.

"No." Wolf shook his head. He raised the light gun he had taken from the guard. "We'll see how those devils like a spray of this."

He triggered the weapon. Purple light washed between the bars of the cage. Broke over the quirsts in a wave of death. They dropped like flies. Yet such was their strange mentality that the survivors of that first blast, instead of fleeing, rushed close to nuzzle obscenely at their fallen fellows. Within three minutes, the last lay dead.

The Earthman swung open the cage door.

"We're free!" he cried. "Lundars and quirsts alike, we've beaten them!"

"I can hardly believe it!" whispered Princess Meersa. "I feel as if it were all a dream—half nightmare, half glorious vision."

"I know," agreed the raider chief. He walked over to where the corpses of Rsk and Znz and the guard lay, stared down at them for a moment in silence. Then:

"Look at them—Rsk and Znz, gar and sub-gar of all the Lundars! An hour ago they were the most powerful pair in the whole universe, from the sun to the farthest asteroid. Intelligent. Strong. Honored by their own people. Feared by all others.

"But now they're dead. Gone down before a herd of stinking slavering quirsts—crawling creatures, physically weak, practically without brains. Yet against them, Lundar power and intelligence didn't count."

The Earthman paused, shook his head slowly. His eyes were somber.

"If I were a philosopher, I might draw some kind of a truth from that—"

"Wolf! The guard!"

It was Orcutt's voice. The raider chief stopped in mid-breath. He whirled.

The other Lundar guard, the one in the protective suit whom Wolf had shoved through the cage door, was on his feet once more. On his feet and moving—running full-tilt for the zoo door that led into the museum.

LIKE a flash, the buccaneer was lunging in pursuit. But his legs could not match the twelve-foot giant's strides. By the time the Earthman had reached the entryway, the Lundar already was sprinting out the other side of the museum, far out of range of light gun fire.

Orcutt and Meersa ran up behind Wolf. The raider turned on them.

"He'll be back!" he snapped. "He, and every Lundar in the place with him."

"We must flee to the central port!" Orcutt exclaimed. "There we can seize some kind of space ship and escape to the *Ghost*."

"No."

"What? You do not want to escape, Wolf Stone?"

The space pirate's lean face was hard. "I want to get away as much as anyone," he snapped grimly, "but I want to be sure we've accomplished something, too. And if we leave now, the Lundars will still be in control on Tela. We've got to break their power."

"Yes. Of course. But how?"

There was a long moment of silence while Wolf restlessly paced the floor, his blue eyes worried beneath their chill. Then suddenly a grim smile sprang to his lips.

"The Tribunal Hall is the Lundar headquarters on Tela, right?"

Orcutt nodded. "Yes."

"Then if we could destroy the Hall,

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and all the Lundars in it, their control would be pretty well shot?"

This time Meersa answered.

"You are right, Wolf Stone," she said, at the same time glancing nervously toward the museum door through which guards might at any moment come charging.

"Come on, then! We've got work to do!" And, to Orcutt: "Bar that door! We're going to need a couple of minutes to work this."

While the two Daus watched in baffled wonderment, the Earthman worked frantically. Switching off the lights—now, since Ra's destruction, electric-powered—, he stripped wires bare.

There was a thundering at the door. Roars of a hundred Lundar guardsmen.

"Hold them, Orcutt!" shouted the buccaneer. "Give me another minute!"

The stocky Dau sprang to obey. He blasted at the giants through crevices with a light gun. For the moment forced them back.

Working like mad, Wolf now attacked the insulation surrounding the great chunk of radioactive ore from Ra which formed one of the museum's central displays. He tore and blasted it away. Lashed a dozen of the light wires about the rock.

The Lundars again were smashing at the portal.

WOLF lunged across the hall. He ripped a long strip of cloth from his own clothing. Used it to connect the door at which the giants were battering with the light switch in such a way that the opening of the panel would turn on the power. He finished the job with a jerk. Then spun about.

"This way!" he gasped, panting with exertion. "Hurry! We can't lose a second!"

Away he dashed, running at top speed for the entrance to the zoo. Meersa and Orcutt were close on his heels.

Into the zoo they sprinted. Down its long central aisle.

Half a dozen Lundars loomed before them.

"A patrol!" gasped Orcutt. "They must have come in the back way!"

His words were drowned in Wolf Stone's snarl. Already the Earthman's light gun was blazing. The first two of the giants went down before its blast.

Then Orcutt and Meersa, too, were firing. Two more Lundars died. The remaining pair fled madly for the exit, Wolf and the young Daus in hot pursuit.

They were out of the Tribunal Hall, now. Sprinting for the entrance to the great central port a few hundred yards away. Other Lundars rose to oppose them—and died or fled.

The trio raced up stairways. Down runways.

"That space ship!" roared Wolf. "It's the old type! It'll take off without broadcast power! Run for it!"

Panting and exhausted, they half-scrambled, half-fell aboard. Orcutt snatched at the controls. With a roar the craft hurtled down the runway. Burst out into the sky.

The next instant the little ship was rocking like a paper boat in a windstorm. It careened through space in a wild rigadoon.

Meersa, her eyes brimming with panic, clutched at the two men.

"What is it?" she cried. "What happened?"

Wolf gave her hand a steadying squeeze.

"It just means my scheme worked," he told her.

"Your scheme—?"

"Yes. You see, that damned radioactive ore from Ra is wildly unstable. That's why electrolytic action always

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turned it into pure energy.

"I figured that if that was the case, maybe short-circuiting a lighting system through it would explode it the same way. So I fixed it so the breaking down of that door to the museum would switch on the lights. It must have worked—because the Tribunal Hall and the Lundars in it are gone!"

The girl's eyes followed the finger he pointed at the telescreen.

Where once the great building had stood, now hovered only a fog of dust and smoke!

IVAR said: "The chief? Sure, he's a swell guy. All aces."

"Yes, I know he is." Meersa sighed and tried again. "But . . . was he really a pirate in this other solar system from which you came? Did he kill and steal—"

The big Jupiterian grinned. "He didn't do nothing else but," he declared. "The Interplanetary Police classed him with acts of God—said they was both disasters. Why, I remember one time we was raiding Neptune—"

Again the Dau princess sighed.

"I wonder why he did it," she said softly. "To me he has been so kind—and yet, a pirate . . ."

"Us pirates ain't so bad," defended Ivar. "We got a lot of good guys. After all, lady, there's some awful goons running our neck of the woods. Why you think Wolf turned raider in the first place?"

"Why did he?" Meersa asked eagerly, her lovely face anxious.

"It was his old man," the other explained. "He was quite a guy, too. A scientist. But some big shot in the Interplanetary Federation got down on him. Killed him and all his family. Only Wolf got away. He was just a kid, but he managed to get to the outer asteroids—the I. P. hadn't mopped up there yet, in them days.

"Well, when he growed up, he was in on a couple of revolutions. But no revolution had the chance of a space ship landing on the sun. Not with the I. P. on the job. So finally Wolf just blasted around from one planet to another, making all the trouble he could for the Federation. Believe me, lady, a lot of folks hadn't never had a square meal 'til Wolf knocked off the garrison over 'em and opened up the storehouses. There's plenty of places where they just about pray to him—"

"Ivar! You mean he was forced to be a pirate? That always he helped the oppressed as he helped us against the Lundars?"

The mate was aggrieved. "Sure. Ain't that what I been telling you all along? Wolf's a swell guy—"

"Oh, Ivar! I am so happy!"

The girl was radiant in her joy. Turning, she darted from the bewildered Jupiterian's presence. Ran down the corridor to Wolf's cabin.

The raider chief was working over a huge celestial chart. He glanced up as the princess came in. Smiling, he motioned her to a chair.

"Sit down, Meersa. Well, how's it going, now that things are on an even keel on Tela again, and you're back in the saddle?"

Meersa ignored the seat. Instead she stood before him, her lovely face just a little strained. Her fingers knotted nervously into small fists.

"Wolf Stone," she said, I must talk to you."

Again he smiled.

"Talk ahead."

SHE swallowed hard, searched her brain for the right words. Her eyes dropped. She bit her lip. Then, in an almost embarrassed little voice:

"It is not good that a woman should

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rule Tela alone, Wolf."

She hesitated, but the Earthman made no move to interrupt. At last she went on.

"There should be a strong man beside me, Wolf. A man like you, to watch over my people . . . and over me."

Still the raider chief said nothing. There was a long moment of uncomfortable silence. At last the girl could stand it no longer. She raised her eyes. They were hurt and angry, and filled with tears. Her lower lip quivered.

"Can you not speak, Wolf Stone?" she cried. "Am I so ugly you cannot endure the thought of me? Must you make me shame myself by telling you that I want you; that I must have you; that I am asking you to marry me and rule beside me?"

The Earthman walked slowly across the cabin, then turned to face her, hands locked behind him, feet wide apart. His lean brown face was no longer hard; only weary. And the blue eyes that had been so cold and menacing now were filled with pain.

"I'm sorry, Meersa," he said, and his voice was old and tired.

"What does that mean, Wolf Stone?" she flared. "Am I not good enough—"

"Please!" He raised his hand to silence her. Ran long fingers through the jet black of his hair. At last: "Meersa, do you realize what I am?"

The anger went out of the girl as quickly as it had come.

"I—I do not understand," she stammered.

"I'm not a king, Meersa. I'm a pirate. 'Scum of the spaceways,' the Interplanetary Police call my men and me. And they're not too far wrong—"

"But that is all past!" the princess broke in passionately. "You were a pirate, yes. But it was in another world. You were forced to it. Ivar told me—"

"Forced to it?" The buccaneer leader threw her a twisted smile. "At first, maybe. But you don't play Robin Hood forever, Meersa. You get so you raid for the thrill of raiding, and for the loot, just as if you were a *Malya* from the outer asteroids—"

"But it is past!" she repeated fiercely. "Forget all that—"

"It isn't past. It can never be past."

"What?" Meersa was bewildered. "I do not see—"

Again the Earthman paced the room, teeth clenched, breathing hard.

"You don't forget the past!" he exclaimed suddenly. "You can't. For years my meat and drink have been action—action—action. I've roved two universes. Fought on more planets than I can count. Lived on excitement.

"How do you think I'd fit into being king on a planet likeTela? How do you think I'd enjoy playing guardian to you and your people? I'll tell you, Meersa: I'd go stark, staring mad within a year. I'd hate you all, and I'd abuse you. I'd be a worse dictator than Rsk ever dreamed of being.

"Not because of anything you'd do, either. No. But I couldn't stand the very peace of it all."

"Then what—"

WOLF'S hand swept out in a gesture toward the celestial charts. "I've seen it coming. For the past week the men have been getting the *Ghost* ready to travel again. Right now I'm only waiting for some final figures."

"And what of me?" choked the girl. "Do I go on until my time is come, ruling Tela by myself and hating every lonely minute?"

The raider chief gripped her shoulders.

"Why should you?" he demanded, looking deep into her tear-filled eyes. "You've got a man."

"I? A man? Who?"

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MURDER FROM THE MOON

by ROBERT BLOCH

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Murder can be committed with two hands very well, but with four, it gives the killer quite a decided advantage indeed

CHAPTER I

Warm Welcome

"AND what do you think of America?" asked Bill Stone, eagerly.

"It surpasses my wildest expectations," answered the visitor.

"You surpass mine," Stone grunted under his breath. Nevertheless, the reporter scribbled hastily. A knot of his fellow scribes crowded closer around the visitor, waving notebooks and craning necks in unison.

"Do you plan a long stay?"

"I have accepted the hospitality of Solar Foundation," the soft voice purred. "It is their intention to exchange information with me for a considerable period of time."

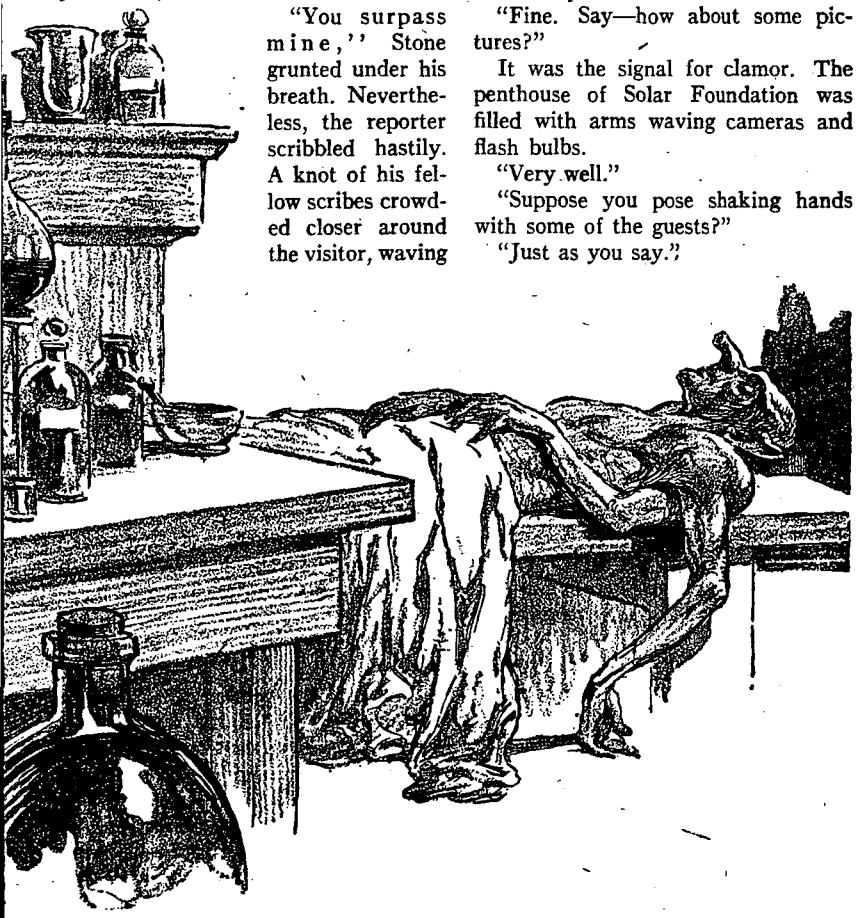
"Fine. Say—how about some pictures?"

It was the signal for clamor. The penthouse of Solar Foundation was filled with arms waving cameras and flash bulbs.

"Very well."

"Suppose you pose shaking hands with some of the guests?"

"Just as you say."



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Bill Stone took charge. He faced the other end of the penthouse chamber, where scientists and savants stood waiting until the press had its will of their visitor.

"Let's see, now." The reporter scanned faces, counted beards, squinted at bald heads.

"Mr. Bennet, you'll pose, of course?"

A bulky young man in a white laboratory apron rose heavily to his feet and smiled in assent. He elbowed his stout body through the crowd of newshounds and took his place beside the visitor.

"I don't suppose you'd object if we included Professor Champion in the same shot?"

"Not at all." Bennet smiled at the scowling, bearded man who bustled towards him. "Hello, Butch," he said.

The Director of the Champion Foundation favored the young head of the Solar Foundation with an intent stare in which all the hatred of his bitter rivalry shone.

The reporter rattled off the names of the rest.

"Changara Dass."

A turbaned Hindu bowed low and approached.

"Miss Valery."

The smiling secretary of Solar took her place with a smile which caused several of the photographers to murmur, "Ah—cheesecake!" in a complimentary fashion.

"O.K." said Stone. He turned to the visitor. "Now, if you'll just shake hands with all of them—"

"All four at once?"

"Certainly."

Bill Stone turned again to the photographers at his side and exulted in low tones.

"Boy, what a shot!" he whispered. "Never anything like it in the history of the world before. Imagine—the four biggest scientists in the world shaking hands with *him*. And at the same time, too!"

IT was quite a scene at that.

There stood the visitor—his four long arms extended from two sets of shoulder blades, his four bird-like claws grasping the hands of the scientists. The visitor's snouted pink face stared affably into the distinguished countenances.

Stone's brain was already busy with captions and headlines.

MAN IN THE MOON MEETS MORTALS

VISITOR FROM VOID PROVES DOWN-TO-EARTH FELLOW

LUNAR LUMINARY SHAKES WITH SCIENTISTS

Why, the creature was almost human! True, it didn't look exactly like a man. Manlike body, yes—but with four arms. And the face was mostly nose; a mass of pinkish flesh with a slit mouth and two popping blue eyes.

Despite this it had a voice of human pitch and timbre, it spoke English, and it certainly seemed at home here on earth. This, and the marvel of the space-ship in which it arrived certainly indicated a mentality equal to any human's.

Stone was still lost in musing as the flashbulbs flickered. He was ready to resume the interview when the fat body of Stephen Bennet blocked him off. Young Bennet raised his arms and voice.

"Quiet please, gentlemen. I feel our distinguished visitor has had enough excitement for the moment. He will be glad to receive the press again tomorrow.

"At the moment I must insist that the reception proceed, so that he be given the opportunity to meet our guests. However, if you like, I'll issue a statement for the papers at this time."

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The great room was hushed as Stephen Bennet, Director of the Solar Foundation, faced his audience.

"I wish my father were here today," said Bennet, softly. "It would have been the greatest triumph in a life filled with triumphs.

"You all know the story of Avery Bennet. Solar Foundation was his achievement. He was a great scientist, a great pioneer, a great discoverer. We know that, now.

"Yet forty years ago they thought him mad. The world felt that he had tricked his financial backers into setting up this gigantic laboratory, that his plans for a flight to the moon were fantastic, impossible. When he announced the completion of his lunar surveys and the construction of the ship to undertake the first voyage, he was laughed at.

"When he announced that he was taking a staff of research men with him, there was almost a court investigation. Finally, when my mother declared she'd acompany him, public indignation reached its peak.

" 'The Mad Noah.' That's what they called my father. You all know the story of how he launched the flight in secrecy. You all know how the press jeered when he failed to return.

"Only Changara Dass, here, believed. He was my father's friend. He fought to keep Solar Foundation legally in my father's name. He waited for a message, for pre-arranged signals that never came.

"At the end of six years—but you know *that* story. The ship that came back; without my father, without the crew. The ship that plummeted to earth in Jersey. The ship in which *I* was born, en route from the Moon to Earth."

HERE, Bennet cast a look of malice at bearded Professor Champion.

"Yes, I was born there in space—when my father locked my mother into the compartments and set the controls to chart the voyage back to earth.

"What became of him we have never been able to learn. What perils forced him to imprison my mother and send her back to the safety of earth? These questions have remained unanswered through the years. You know my mother died at my birth. It was Changara Dass who took me from that spaceship, reared me in the tradition of Solar Foundation.

"For thirty-odd years we have waited here—waited while so-called scientists have jeered and sneered at the story. It was too fantastic for them to swallow. It was all a hoax, they claimed. My father had never reached the moon. He'd hidden out somewhere—sent the ship back to prove his wild story of a flight. For thirty-odd years we have endured these insinuations, endured the malicious libels of men like Professor Champion."

Bennet cleared his throat.

"My father's secrets, we thought, died with him. We had no access to his plans for constructing a new vessel. He sent back no charts, no journals, no vestige of proof or record of his discoveries. We could not answer our critics. We could only wait.

"During those years I have had faith in my father. Changara Dass has had faith. We knew that sooner or later there would be proof forthcoming.

"The years have been bitter. I will not hide the fact. The press has made a mockery of my own life. Called me 'The Moon-calf.' Ridiculed the way I was educated here in the privacy of the Solar Foundation. Laughed at my habit of hiding from the world, carrying on astronomical and astro-physical research.

"Now it is my turn to laugh. Three

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days ago, when the space-ship landed upstate, the world learned for the first time that my father's secrets had not died with him. That there was life on the moon—as he had always claimed. That this life possessed intelligence, that it had learned from him, worked with him, and created indisputable proof of its own.

"Because when the space-ship was entered, we found—our visitor.

"He is here today to tell the story to the world. And the world, laughing no longer, is waiting to hear him.

"I need not impress you with the importance of this moment. For the world, it means the beginning of a new era in scientific achievement. For me, it means a little more."

Bennet's voice softened.

"It means that I shall learn at last the story of my father's flight—of his life, and his last days. It means that the name of Bennet will rise from ignominy to shine beside the stars."

There was a murmur of excitement from the crowd.

"Today you—the great scientific names of this world—are gathered here to meet a man from another world."

Lila Valery stepped before the impassioned scientist and pressed his arm with a smile.

"Stephen, dear, you're talking too much. Let's get on with the reception."

"Guess you're right." Bennet waved his arm.

"You'll find drinks at the end of the room. Shall we proceed with a little informal discussion and introductions?"

CROWD murmurs swelled to conversational pitch. Bennet, Changara Dass, and Lila Valery moved towards the fleshy pink body of the lunar visitor. The scowling Professor Champion was already deep in conversation, his eyebrows wagging cynically.

The pink snout of the visitor flashed up when Bennet neared.

"I must see you at once. I have an urgent message for you. You are to come back with me, you know."

"What's that?" Bennet gasped.

"I cannot delay any longer. I had thought to humor you by attending this —reception, you call it?—and then leave. I see you have other ideas, so I must speak to you at once."

"This sounds interesting." Professor Champion gazed intently at the fleshy countenance.

But Bennet paled.

"Perhaps, if it's so urgent, we'd best step into the other room for a moment. Dass, you come with me. And you, Lila."

"Surely you wouldn't exclude a fellow-scientist from these revelations?" Champion's tone was mocking.

Bennet gave him a long look.

"Come along if you wish," he invited.

They retreated discreetly to the doorway of an adjoining chamber.

The lunar visitor shuffled along, waving his pinkish arms grotesquely.

"All this noise—this excitement—it makes me cold. You know, Stephen."

Bennet bit his lip. "Of course. I'd forgotten. Can I get you a cocktail?"

"Cocktail?"

"It contains alcohol. Warms the blood."

"It's a cold drink, though," Lila interjected.

"Yes—so it is. Better make it cocoa. Did you prepare some, Dass?"

The aged Hindu nodded.

"Get a cup and hurry."

The turbaned savant withdrew hastily. They stood alone in the antechamber.

"And now—"

"Spill it, friend."

The four-armed moon visitor turned. So did his companions.

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"How did you sneak in here?" Bennet angrily addressed Bill Stone. The young reporter faced him with a disarming grin.

"It's my business to go after news. Something tells me there's plenty of it right in this room."

"I must ask you to leave at once. This is a private matter."

"Please." The moon man quavered, hysteria droning through the queer, high-pitched voice. "All this excitement—I am getting so cold—so cold."

The long arms were trembling now. The slick, poreless flesh was chafed, and the pinkish glow was queerly dull.

"I forgot. Where's Dass with that cocoa?"

Bennet made for the door, disappeared. Dass entered with the steaming cup a moment later. Bennet followed, grasped it hastily.

"Here you are."

"Wait—you're spilling it. Allow me." Champion, grinning in disdain at Bennet's excitement, grasped the cocoa and offered it to the visitor.

One of the four arms extended in a weaving, octopoidal pattern. The claw-like hand closed around the cup and the creature from the moon raised it to his lips, draining the steaming contents.

A little sigh of satisfaction bubbled from the fleshy pink throat.

Then came another sigh.

It wasn't satisfaction.

Four arms rose simultaneously. Four claws clutched at a convulsive neck. The tall body trembled in sudden revulsion.

"Wait—what's wrong—"

Lila Valery stepped forward to face the shuddering moon man, but it was too late for inquiry.

With a shrill scream the lunar visitor fell and huddled in a writhing heap on the carpet. As the others watched, the pinkish flesh slowly faded to a dead rose colour, then turned silver as frost. In less than a minute the thing on the floor lay still. Still and—

"Dead!"

Changara Dass felt for a pulse forever stilled.

"Dead and—cold." Champion drew his hand away from the neck with a shudder. "Cold as ice."

"Oh!" Lila Valery hid her eyes with her hands. For the white body was quite silver now—silver and shining, like the moon that gave it birth.

They stared.

All but Bill Stone, the reporter. He made the door in three strides.

"Got my story," he panted. "And what a story! THE MAN IN THE MOON IS—MURDERED!"

CHAPTER II

The Strangler from the Sky

IT was Lila Valery who stopped Stone.

The fact that the reporter allowed himself to be persuaded was a tribute to her eloquence—or perhaps to her brown eyes.

"Don't you see?" the girl pleaded. "It would create a scandal that would ruin Solar Foundation. We can't let those people outside know."

"Got to notify the police anyway," Stone argued.

"Why? Are you sure it's murder? It might be shock—exhaustion—anything. You can't print such a story until you have proof."

"But—"

Champion intervened.

"I think she's right. Let me go out and dismiss the guests. Tell them our visitor needs rest. Then when we're alone, I'll see to it that you get your story. I'm interested in going to the bottom of this affair myself. I'll take this cooca, with Bennet's permission, and analyze it for poison. You'll get

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your story, I promise you, and shortly."

Champion flung a baleful glance at Stephen Bennet, who shrugged. "Go ahead," he mumbled. "Does that suit you, Stone?"

The reporter answered, but he looked at Lila Valery.

"I suppose it's worth waiting for."

Champion stalked out.

In a few moments he returned. "They're leaving," he announced. "Now, if you will excuse me for a few moments, I'll make use of your excellent laboratories, Mr. Bennet. Perhaps Changara Dass would accompany me to verify my report?"

Dass rose silently. His brown hand closed around the cup. He scooped it from the floor where it had fallen. A few drops of brownish liquid still rested in the rounded side.

Together the scientist and the savant departed. Stone, Lila, and Stephen Bennet remained.

It was Stone who drew a couch-cover over the silent silver monstrosity on the floor. Bennet and the girl were huddled in the corner.

The stout young man was trembling as he rocked to and fro, head bowed.

"Don't—Stephen," Lila whispered.

"I can't help it," sighed Bennet. "Don't you realize what this means? Here, at the very moment of triumph, all that I've worked for and lived for has been snatched away. The clearing of my name, and my father's name. The research and knowledge that could have been ours. Gone now. Because he died before he could speak!"

"Dou you think he was—murdered?" Lila whispered.

"I don't know. I can't think. Dass carried the cocoa. I handled it. And Champion gave it to him. If it contained poison, we're the only suspects. And none of us has a motive."

"Perhaps not." Stone thought aloud. "You haven't, Bennet. But Professor Champion is your rival, after all. He has been the chief critic of you and your father, and he is the head of the Champion Foundation."

Surprisingly enough, Bennet bridled. His pudgy features creased indignantly.

"Professor Champion, whatever his scientific attitude may be, is a man of unquestioned integrity. Certainly he would never be so foolhardy as to endanger his reputation by so clumsy a trick."

"And this Changara Dass?"

"Changara Dass is my friend, my father's friend. Today's success meant as much to him as it did to me."

LILA VALERY rose and faced the reporter. "I think your hunch is wrong. Our lunar visitor had a chill. You heard him complain of the cold, didn't you? We don't know anything about the physiology of these creatures. Probably he succumbed to his seizure just as he drank the cocoa. I'm willing to wager that Dass and Champion find no trace of poison in that cocoa."

"Right you are." Champion's booming voice rose as he entered the room, followed by the Hindu. He faced Stephen Bennet.

"We found nothing, absolutely nothing," the Hindu added. His turbaned head nodded slowly as he bent over the cloth-covered object on the floor.

"We shall, therefore, proceed with the autopsy at once."

"Wait a minute." Bennet was on his feet.

"Yes?"

"Do you think it's really—necessary?"

"If you don't do it, the coroner will."

"But the law has no rights over a lunar inhabitant."

"Stephen Bennet." The Hindu's

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voice was soft, grave. "I have known you all your life. Was I not as a father and mother to you?"

"Yes, Changara Dass."

"Have we not worked together, planned together for this day? Have we not dreamed of the heritage of wisdom which might be ours?"

"True."

Dass's eyes gleamed. "Today we have met seeming failure. Death has stilled the voice that could have told us all we wished to learn. But with an autopsy, we can perhaps cheat death."

"How?"

"We can study the physiology of our visitor. The structure, the mechanics of his anatomy. Even if we find no trace of poison, there are things we want to learn, you and I. Is that not true?"

Bennet bit his lip.

"Yes. You're right. Go ahead with it then, man—but don't talk about it. I don't like to hear you talk about it. I can't stand it."

His voice rose, cracked. Lila Valery's arms soothed his huddled shoulders.

Silently Dass stooped and gathered the limp, cold body of the moon man in his arms. The dangling silver arms hung bobbing from the folds of the cloth as he carried the corpse from the room.

Lila turned to Stephen Bennet.

"Lie down. Try to rest," she urged. "It will be an hour or so at least. We'll go down the hall."

Champion cleared his throat. "Might as well stick here and see this thing through," he decided. "But I'm not going to sit around. I'm hungry. There's a table full of food in the next room, and that's where you'll find me."

IN THE end it was Bill Stone who followed Lila Valery down the twilight-darkened hall to the office. He sat on the desk, swinging his legs, his blue eyes frankly appraising the girl in an admiring grin.

"You seem to be the only cheerful person around here," the girl murmured. "This place is like a—"

"Morgue," Stone finished for her. "That's what it is, with bodies being dissected, and all the trimmings."

"Please, let's not talk about it," Lila whispered. "I'm worried."

"Bennet?"

"Yes. He's so upset about this thing."

"He'll sleep it off and forget it." Stone smiled. "You must be very fond of him—covering him up and everything. Maternal instinct?"

"We're engaged." Her voice was low.

"Oh. I understand."

"Stephen's a brilliant man. But he has to be watched over, always. Changara Dass is like a nursemaid to him. Humors him. Because he isn't like the rest of us, you see."

"No, I don't see, exactly."

"Well, you heard what he said today about his father—Avery Bennet, who founded Solar, and made the moon voyage. How his mother went along, and how Stephen was born out there in space on the way back.

"Stephen has never forgotten his heritage. Never forgotten that he's—well, an outsider, really. Sometimes I think he's really alien to this world at heart.

"You know, he's never left this Foundation since he came here?"

"Really?"

"Changara Dass brought him up. He had a private tutor. He lives here in his own apartments, refuses to go outside. His childhood was hardly—normal. All his life he's hated the world for what it did to his father. He shuns

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people. Stephen has worked and waited only for the day when proof of his father's discovery would be forthcoming. Not until then, he swore, would he enter the outside world."

"You mean he doesn't even go out of the building for a shave?" Stone asked, incredulously.

"No. Even the tailors come here for his fittings. He's a recluse. Or was, until I met him. I've tried to wean him away from these eccentricities of his. I think I've succeeded, a little. But even though we're engaged, I sometimes feel that he *resents* me. He gets these bitter moods and I don't understand him. Oh, but why should I tell you this—"

"It's been very interesting," Stone protested. "Very. But tell me—what about the landing of this space-ship and our late lunar friend? Just what did Bennet expect to learn from all this?"

"I don't know, exactly. When the ship came down, three days ago, he and Changara Dass were as surprised as the rest of the world. When they found this creature inside and it asked at once to be taken to Solar Foundation, Stephen knew that it was the expected proof from his father at last.

"He told me that it meant a complete vindication of everything he'd claimed. That his father had discovered life on the moon, that he had probably lived on up there for a long time—long enough to establish communication and interchange knowledge with the lunar inhabitants.

"Naturally, all this was conjecture. Stephen hoped that the moon man would possess complete information—tell him of Avery Bennet's life and fate, and exchange data. The moon man asked to be brought here to Solar Foundation, as you know; asked for Stephen Bennet, and refused to divulge anything to anyone else."

"In other words, he made the voyage especially to see Bennet?"

"Yes."

STONE pursed his lips.

"Miss Valery—Lila—do you recall what the moon man said when we went into the private room? About some message he had for Stephen—about wanting him to come back?"

"That's right."

"Did he mean that he wanted Stephen Bennet to return to the moon *with* him?"

"I don't know. He *did* say something like that, didn't he?"

"I wonder why."

"Perhaps he had news of his father."

"Perhaps." Bill Stone dismissed the notion momentarily. He rose, wiped his forehead.

"Whew! Don't see how he froze to death. It's hot enough here to boil eggs."

"They keep it warm enough here at Solar Foundation. Changara Dass is something of a fanatic on the subject of air-conditioning. He sees to it that the temperature is always up in the eighties and nothing can argue him out of it."

"I wonder if the old swami is making any progress?"

"Progress?"

"Yes, on his little carv—on the autopsy, I mean."

The answer came in the form of a sudden buzz from the desk telephone.

Stone lifted the receiver.

"Mr. Stone?" It was the voice of Dass, a hasty whisper.

"Yes."

"Mr. Stone, I wonder if you would care to step down the hall to the surgery. It's at the far end, at the right."

"Why? Something up?"

"I think, Mr. Stone, that I have news for you. Some very startling news."

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"I'll be right down."

The reporter clicked the receiver back.

"Lila, you stay here. I'm going over to the morgue—I mean, the surgery."

"And leave me here all alone? Not on your life!"

The girl joined him.

Together, the two moved down the black corridor of the empty Foundation. Once outside, Lila made it evident that she regretted her decision to accompany him. The girl shivered at the shadows, and involuntarily her hand clutched Stone's wrist.

"I'm scared," she murmured.

"Of what? There's no one here but ourselves."

"I can't help it. I have a feeling something's wrong."

"Forget it. Dass is waiting for us. Here."

Bill Stone pushed open the surgery door.

They entered.

Lila screamed.

Changara Dass was waiting for them. But the turbaned Hindu would wait forever. He slumped forward over the horrible pinkish body of the moon man, his eyes bulging glassily in a fixed stare at the corpse on the slab. His brown skin was very pale indeed, save for one spot around his neck.

One spot on Changara Dass's neck—a long, pinkish spot forming the outline of a hand. A hand that had twisted around the Hindu's throat and strangled him to death.

CHAPTER III

The Lunatic

THEY found Bennet on his couch down the hall. Champion dropped his sandwich in the outer chamber a moment later. The four of them were back in the surgery room, trying hard to keep their eyes away from the death that seemed to lurk in the shadows.

"The hand," Champion whispered. "Look at the prints. No human hand makes such an impression."

"It was his," Bennet muttered. "His." He started down at the pinkish body lying on the slab. "Look at those claws. They did it."

"But he's dead," Stone answered. "Dead man can't rise and murder."

"Dead *men* cannot rise," Bennet groaned. "But he wasn't a man. He was a creature from another world, another planet. Who knows what ghastly laws govern such beings?"

"You're hysterical, Bennet," scowled Professor Champion. "Look." His hands went to the creature's armpits. "These tendons were severed by the dissecting knife. The thing, even if animated, couldn't raise its arms, let alone strangle a man with its hands."

"But it did," Bennet whispered. "Or *something* did. A ghost, perhaps. Perhaps it was a ghost."

"Don't be a fool!" Champion objected. "Let's reason this thing out. Dass called Stone. In less than two minutes Stone and Miss Valery arrived. They found Dass dead."

"Dead." Bennet couldn't control himself. "Dass is dead. He had found something out and he was going to tell. So he died. The moon guards its secrets well. It's fate, I tell you! We weren't meant to know such things—that's what we get for meddling! Let's burn the bodies, get out of here!"

"Stephen."

"I'm sorry, darling. But it's too much."

"I know. Let's go back to the office."

"Go ahead." Champion took command. "I'll phone the police."

"Police?"

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"Of course. There's no doubt of at least one murder, now.

"That's right," Bill Stone agreed. "And I'll phone the office with the story."

Bennet shrugged.

"I suppose," he said, tonelessly, "This means the end, but it has to be."

Together he and Lila left the room. Champion followed.

"Coming, Stone?" he called.

"I'll stay here for a minute and look around. Want to get the details straight in my mind. Once the cops get here we reporters won't have a chance."

"Very well. I'll go back to the reception room and phone from there."

Champion left.

Bill Stone stared down at the partly-dissected cadaver of the moon-creature. Once more he gazed at the horrible prints on the dead Hindu's throat. He fingered the scalpels and instruments on the adjoining table. He noted the empty cocoa cup and the partly-filled retorts beside it. He ran his eyes along the cabinet of pharmacopia.

SUDDENLY his eyes were arrested by a label. He opened a metal tin curiously. Then he stared at the dead moon man once again.

With a shrug of decision, he selected an empty glass from the table and poured the contents of the tin into it. Then he covered the glass with a handkerchief.

Quickly, he left the room and headed down the corridor. It was pitch black now, and silent as death. Silent as the death that crept through the night about him. Death that had crept and then sprung.

As he neared the closed office door the silence was broken by the strident murmur of conversation.

Stone paused outside.

Bennet and Lila, inside.

"But don't you see?" Bennet's voice. "I can't face that, Lila. It will ruin me—ruin the Foundation. The publicity, the investigation, the suspicions. And in the end, they'll never get anywhere. They can't bring Dass or the moon man back to life. They'll never be able to tell the story that will clear my father's name."

"But your idea is madness."

"Why? What other way of escape is open? The space-ship is waiting. It's ready. I have no charts or instruments, but the control system itself should be easily mastered. We can take it and get away now, before the police arrive. Come with me, Lila."

"To the moon? No, Stephen—I can't."

"Lila, don't you understand? I want to know. I want to find out for myself. I could go there and prove that my father was right—go there and return with the full story. We could be together, you and I.

"And who knows, Lila? Who knows what we might find up there? Avery Bennet might have built himself an empire. We could rule that empire, Lila, you and I. I am his son. I have the heritage of my birth. Oh, I know it sounds like madness, but it's the one chance, the only chance."

"You're wrong."

Bill Stone entered quietly, stood in the doorway. Bennet wheeled, his pudgy arms waving, his face flushed with agitation.

"Stone!"

"I think I can help you out," the reporter replied. "No need to go to the bother of that lunar trip. At least I think I know how our moon man was murdered."

"Poison?"

"No." Stone smiled. "He was literally frozen to death. That's what Dass must have discovered during the au-

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topsy. That's why he called me. And I think I've found out what did it."

The reporter turned to the girl.

"Lila—go get Professor Champion. He'll want to hear this."

The girl nodded, left the room.

As the door closed, Bennet shook his head.

"I still don't understand."

"It's very simple." Stone held out the glass, covered by his handkerchief. "This stuff here did it."

Bennet took the glass and held it. His eyes met Stone's. "But what about Changara Dass? Who killed him?"

"That's a puzzler, isn't it? Perhaps we can solve that when the others get back."

ABRUPTLY, Bennet winced. "Here, Stone—take this. It's too damned cold to hold."

Stone retrieved the glass.

"Aren't you going to look inside?" he asked. "Cold or not, I'd think you'd be interested in what it contains. Unless," he murmured, "unless you already know."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you murdered the moon man."

Stephen Bennet laughed. Then he did a very curious thing. His hands fumbled with his white jacket.

Stone watched him closely. Too closely. He didn't see Bennet's feet glide forward. They glided swiftly—and suddenly Stephen Bennet sprang.

His fists crashed against the reporter's face. Stone moved back, arms flailing as he beat against the bulky body of his assailant.

Bennet's blows glanced from his forehead. A fist dug into his eye. Stone parried, trying to keep off those lunging arms.

Bennet was punching, punching. And then Stone felt cold horror. For as Bennet's fists punched at his face, Bennet's hands were locked around his neck!

It could not be—but it was! Stone saw the fists hammer towards him through a red haze. And at the same time he felt fingers tighten in his throat. Strong, tearing fingers digging away his life!

Bill Stone glanced down and saw them then—saw what was strangling and clawing at his neck.

Saw, from Bennet's opened jacket, *the two pink arms—the two extra arms, ending in the birdlike claws.* The claws of a moon man!

Then the red haze welled up. Stone's head whirled. Desperately he parried blows from human fists. And all the while the hidden hands from inside Bennet's jacket pressed and pressed.

Stone went to his knees.

The monster was gasping now. Bennet's great bulging eyes shone with maniacal intensity as he ripped and tore. A high, wheezing cackle burst from his corded, pinkish neck.

Blindly, Stone fumbled for his pocket. Bennet was bending him back. The cold claws were digging deep. In a moment it would all be over. In a moment—

With a last desperate wrench, Stone's fingers closed about the glass, tore away the handkerchief. One hand rose to Bennet's neck. He pressed the glass down, let the contents pour forward.

Bennet screamed. The two pinkish arms fell away, tore at Stone's hand, clawed at the glass cupped tightly against Bennet's neck.

Stone rose. He pressed the glass down.

Bennet's fingers clutched the air. His human fists fell. A gurgling came from a pinkish neck that slowly whitened. The color drained from Bennet's face.

The glass dug deeper. And then

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Stephen Bennet fell. Fell like a white ghost, like a silver ghost.

In a moment the bulky body lay inert upon the floor. The two horrid tentacles lay limp, the claws extended upwards in a last gesture of supplication.

"BILL!"

Lila was at Stone's side, and Champion with her.

"I had to do it," the reporter gasped. "I had to."

"Those arms—" the girl whispered. "Look at those arms."

"No wonder he always wore that heavy jacket," Stone whispered. "Look at the straps—he had them strapped down at his sides. No wonder he never went out; had a special tailor."

"What does it mean?"

"It means that Stephen Bennet's mother was not human," Stone answered. "That was his secret, and his father's secret. Changara Dass must have known, and shielded Bennet all these years. Stephen Bennet had moon blood in his veins.

"When the lunar visitor came, he had a mission. He wanted Bennet to forsake earth and return to the moon. Bennet preferred the fame that would be his if he remained here on earth, as a human.

"The lunar visitor was about to insist—and Bennet feared he would reveal his secret, if necessary, in order to make him go back.

"So Bennet murdered him. Changara Dass discovered how he did it during the autopsy, and phoned me. Bennet must have been listening in on the wire. He got to the surgery before I did. Using his lunar tentacles, he strangled Dass.

"Then he wanted to escape in the space-ship, knowing he'd be discovered if the police examined him. He was pleading with Lila here to accompany him when I walked in and announced that I'd solved the lunar visitor's death. So he tried to kill me as well."

"But how did he do it?" Champion asked. "That's still a mystery." He scowled. "There was no poison—I'm sure of that."

"Of course there wasn't. No need for it. Bennet, having lunar blood himself, knew the weakness of the moon beings. Knew they cannot stand cold. He always had it hot as an oven here, you remember.

"So he slipped something into the cocoa which immediately chilled the moon man's system; paralyzed his peculiar blood stream with sudden cold. Something that wouldn't show up in analysis; something we'd never expect in steaming cocoa."

"What was that?"

"Nothing but simple, every-day dry ice," Stone grinned.

"It steamed naturally in the cup and left no traces. I found a can of it in the surgery, brought a glassful here. When Bennet attacked me, I pressed the stuff against his throat. You know the rest."

There was a long silence in the little room. Lila's hand went to Bill's shoulders as they stared at the tentacled body on the floor.

"He wanted me to go there with him—to the moon," she whispered. "I'm glad I refused."

"Perhaps it is not meant for men to dwell beyond earth," mused Champion, gravely.

"Let's get out of here," was all Bill Stone said. They moved towards the door. Stone snapped out the light.

"Look!" whispered Lila.

Through the high windows, a shaft of silvery moonlight crept into the room. It moved over the floor and bathed the grotesque, crumpled body in an evil glow. But in its rays the face of Stephen Bennet shone with a peaceful light.

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"Maybe he's gone there, now. Back up there, where his spirit belongs."

"Maybe," Stone nodded. "But right at the moment, my spirit belongs somewhere else. Somewhere where there is electric light and a little down-to-earth entertainment. Want to join me?"

"All right."

"I may have a few drinks, too."

Lila smiled. "That's all right with me," she murmured. "But Bill, if you have a drink, promise me one thing."

"What's that?"

"Don't put any ice in it."

They closed the door behind them. In the little room, the silvery light continued to pour down on the dead face of the man from the moon.

(*Concluded from page 57*)

"Orcutt."

"Orcutt! That boy! When I compare him with you—"

"When you compare him with me, you should thank your lucky stars that you're fortunate enough to have him, my little princess. That boy loves you. He'd cut his own heart out if he thought it would please you. He has a steady head on his shoulders, and brains to fill it. He'll make a king you and your people can be proud of—"

The cabin door opened. Moko, the Uranian scientist, followed by Ivar, entered. The little savant waved a sheaf of papers triumphantly.

"I've got it!" he cried. "I've worked out everything. The whole formula. Route's all planned."

Wolf turned to Ivar.

"What about the supplies?" he demanded. "Is everything on board?"

"The whole works, chief," the big mate nodded. "Crew's on, too."

"Then prepare to blast off!"

"Huh? Now?"

"You heard me! We're leaving. Get a move on!"

Meersa gripped the Earthman's arm. "Wolf! You cannot—"

"On the contrary." He lifted her off her feet, carried her to the forward hatch.

"Good luck, Meersa. Say good-bye to Orcutt for me. And may you and Tela always prosper!"

He set her down on the runway. The hatch swung shut.

She was still standing there, watching the *Ghost* fade into space, when Orcutt ran up.

"They've gone?" he gasped incredulously.

"Yes."

The young Dau stood close behind her, his eyes—like hers—glued on the blurring dot against the sky. His arms slipped about her waist; she did not pull away.

"There goes a man!" he said.

And Meersa nodded.

THE END

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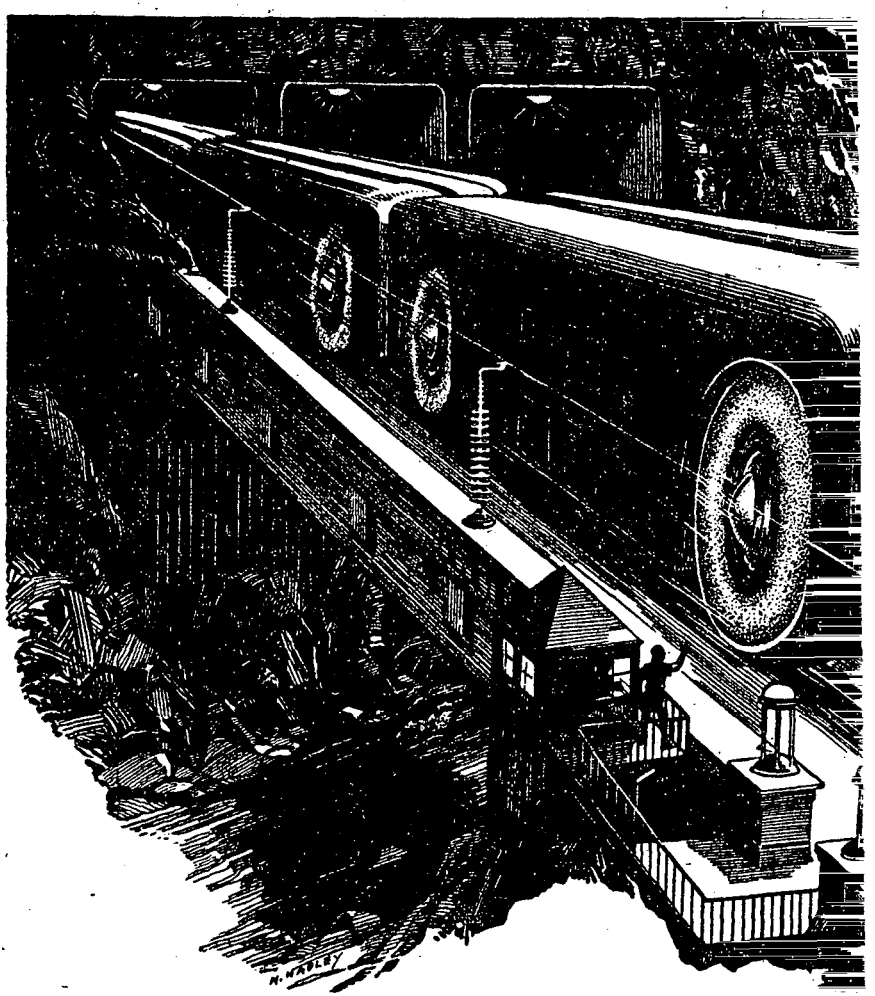

DEATH RIDES AT NIGHT

It was death to ride Translucent Highway tonight; but a coward's brand is worse!

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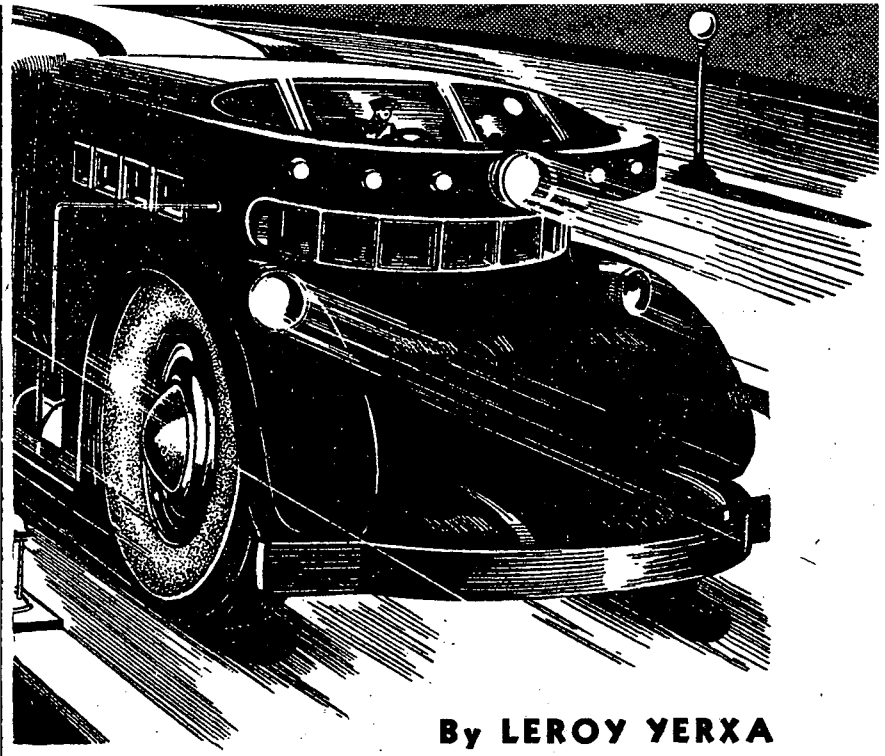

By LEROY YERXA

"ARROW" LAWSON, folded uncomfortably into the tiny "Air Bug," clutched the side of the cockpit tightly and watched the great translucent highway reel backward beneath them. From their perch three thousand feet above the great truck lane, the glowing stretch of Trans-World Highway was visible for a hundred miles in either direction. Ken Barnes had the Bug floating silently. Suddenly he pointed a finger horizonward toward the lighted towers of East Station. From the flashing minor metropolis a tiny beetle crawled along the surface of the highway. Arrow Lawson nodded grimly, his worried eyes following Ken Barnes' finger.

The beetle was under them now, a mammoth Diesel truck thundering

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along at two hundred miles an hour. Abruptly it staggered as though a giant hand had grappled with it. A rosebud of flame mushroomed from under its hood.

The "Air Bug" jolted into a mean air pocket and Lawson lunged wildly, clutching at his companion's shoulder for support. Releasing his grasp, he peered down again, his face red. Damn, he could never get used to air travel. . . .

Below them the truck had plunged wildly from the highway. The tractor was bathed in fire; the trailer a twisted, crushed mass of aluminumite. For ten miles to the rear of the accident the translucent lane had changed from its normal glowing green to the angry red of the danger warning. Traffic screamed to a halt and tiny figures swarmed around the blaze. Lawson was sick.

"Take her down," he ordered.

The twin rockets in the Bug's tail exploded behind them, and they shot from the sky. Other patrol scouts were roaring down from all directions. A mob had clustered around the wreck by the time Ken could land.

They fought their way through the crowd, Lawson conscious only of his two buddies who were frying in that cab. A pitiful, charred leg hung at a crazy angle from the crushed metal. The burned boot still clinging to the crushed bone. A rescue attempt was useless. Arrow looked away, his stomach turned by the sight.

The men behind him were talking.

"That's him." The voice wasn't friendly. "Lawson; supposed to be Trans-America's ace driver—"

"Yeah, what about the driving he *ain't* doing, while these other guys are cracking up?"

Lawson turned quickly, but the owners of the voices were hidden. His face reddened, as he realized that these men had been his buddies. Now they thought he was a coward. If he couldn't get a line on this thing pretty soon, there would be a lot more talk. He turned again to the wreck.

HIGHWAY scouts had snuffed out the fire with their small gas guns and one body had been removed and carefully covered. With torches they were at work cutting the other driver free.

Lawson dropped on his haunches and watched them work, a puzzled frown on his face. Eight trucks gone, and he still couldn't find that one little clue. Fifteen drivers, burned and broken corpses and Arrow knew he'd have to get action soon or go nuts. His gray eyes wandered over the mess once more. He studied the hulking death trap carefully, searchingly— The metalode antenna . . . on his feet in a flash, the long legs carried him like pistons to the side of the upturned cab.

"Ken," he shouted, "I've got it."

A murmur went through the watching crowd. Some of the drivers pushed forward. Ken came on the double.

"What?" he dropped on his knees beside Lawson.

"The antenna," Arrow's voice was hushed in utter disbelief. "The damned thing's *straight*."

For a minute Ken understood, then he shook his head:

"It's no good, fella'," he stood up and stretched wearily, "You're getting to the point where a straw isn't too small to grab at."

Lawson didn't hear him. He was running the tips of his fingers along the straightened rod, mumbling under his breath.

"The cab turned on its right side," he said. "Something straightened that antenna like a match stick from

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the *left* side."

"Then the same vague *thing* was responsible for the others. We didn't notice the antenna on *them*." Ken's voice was tinged with good natured sarcasm.

"Because the other trucks piled up and destroyed the metalode," Arrow was still on his knees, eyeing the slim metal strand with a puzzled expression. "It's the last thing we'd suspect after all the safety lectures they pound into us about this thing."*

ARROW eased the dual-controlled tractor of Transport Six down the long ramp to Trans-American's loading dock. The night spent with Barnes cramped into the tiny Sky Bug's cockpit hadn't been helpful to his frame of mind. Unfolding painfully, his long legs touched the ground and almost failed under him. He winced, and a scowl crossed his dark face. Being the longest cuss in the outfit had its drawbacks. The boys had laughed at him that first morning eight years ago. But after the gawky kid, Lawson, had put a few Diesels through their paces, the laughing had been replaced by glances of respect.

He walked toward the main office, thinking about the grab he'd made at Ken the night before, when the plane had dropped sickeningly.

Lawson's father told him it was the fall he'd taken from a crib as a kid that made him fear the air. That was as good as anything. He knew that any place his feet couldn't stretch out and touch solid earth wasn't the place for him, and he thanked Ken silently for shutting up like a clam about the incident. Anyone but the understanding patrol scout would have had the story spread far and wide by daybreak.

Without knocking, Lawson opened the monosteel door to Riley Blackson's glittering office. He folded up slowly in the leather chair beside the desk. Blackson's head was bowed. The owner of Trans-American was a

* The metalode antenna was developed during the latter part of the twenty-third century. A fuller understanding of its use will be made clear by the history of Translucent Trans-World Highways. Plastic highways were in use as early as 2144. With the puny efforts of twentieth century scientists exhausted, more advanced students of plastic attempted to study its practical uses. Professor James T. Flannigan of East Station Metal-Lab, caused the first slabs of plastic to be laid over the route of the ancient Pennsylvania turnpike. The run made a splendid proving ground.

Plastica (trade name for highway plastic) could be applied in semi-fluid form at the rate of two hundred miles a day. After solidifying, Plastica became adaptable to heavy, fast truck traffic with no further worries about upkeep.

Plastica, however, like the plastic comb when drawn through your hair, generated dangerous amounts of static electricity. Before the high speeds of two and three hundred miles per hour could be reached safely, this problem had to be conquered. During the early days many trucks were destroyed by this invisible agent of death.

In 2385, John Williamson, traffic expert had solved the problem with a simple metalode antenna. This antenna, its metal a thousand times stronger than steel, projected from the left side of the tractor for three feet and turned a ninety degree angle to contact the highway edge. With the end of this "Columbus and the Egg" mystery, no further accidents were reported.

Translucent highways were undermined by a series of almost human electric switches. Electriglow lamps caused the surface to glow a dull green color when traffic was moving. If any disturbance occurred (stalled truck, entering traffic, etc.), the highway's color would change, like the wily chameleon, to a bright, warning red for a distance of ten miles to the rear of the disturbance. All country rules forced drivers in this zone to halt at once until the emerald go-ahead signal re-appeared.

Translucent highways at first connected the two great cities of East Station on the Atlantic Coast and West Station on the opposite side of America. Its only stop in this long run was Halfway Point, situated for the comfort of highway drivers in the center of the country, a half-day journey from either starting point.

With world peace as its objective, the highway was later stretched on aluminumite, gyroscopically stabilized pontoons across the oceans. Translucent Trans-World carried billions of tons of freight to all corners of All Country Union.

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small man, with a large, snow-white head. The stature of his body did not matter beside the keen, eager methods of a clever brain. Forty years of nursing this truck business into the front line had given the man character that more than made up for weak muscles. Without looking up, he spoke.

"I was talking with Barnes on the telascreen . . ."

Lawson nodded, understanding the man's anguish. Their eyes met, Blackson's tired—caged.

"He says you found something?"

"Perhaps I'm wrong . . . " Lawson stood up and strode across the room. Down through the polarized walls he could see the long row of Diesels standing at the freight shed.

"Something has been fooling with those *fool proof* antennas. Every truck is checked before it pulls out. I say *something* because there isn't a living person who could touch a truck while its moving at two-hundred per . . ."

Riley shook his head dejectedly, the muscles of his mouth twitching.

"Only tremendous force would straighten out those rods. "I'm sorry, boy. There just isn't any such force."

ARROW'S eyes were glued to the desk top. Riley had reached unconsciously toward a small metal dog. Drawing it slowly across the glass top, he watched its twin jump to its side, drawn by the magnet in the base. They clung as one under his finger.

"Such a force could be *made*, if the motives were strong enough."

"That's what sticks me," Blackson pushed the metal pups away in a gesture of despair. "How did it get *our* number?"

"That's what I've got to figure out," Lawson answered slowly. "The motive could be simple. It might even be you . . . Insurance, perhaps?"

Blackson was on his feet, his chin white with anger.

"Arrow," he spoke evenly, "if you meant to be funny, I fail to see the joke."

Then he slumped down again.

"I—I'm sorry, I know you're kidding. Guess I'm kind of up in the air about this mess."

Arrow didn't answer. He was sorry now that he'd said it. Every man in the outfit was a suspect. Every man was straining his nerves to a raw edge to keep going.

The door opened quietly and Eve Blackson stood just outside. Riley's daughter was startlingly lovely with the anger that had spread across her pink cheeks.

"It takes a *star* driver to sit in the office and accuse Dad of murder, while the other boys are out fighting . . ."

Her voice broke the silence like a bomb shell. In spite of himself, Lawson jumped. He turned toward the girl, his throat dry and shame slicing any answer short. Every muscle of the girl's smooth body shook with temper. Her eyes burned into his own, full red lips quivering in anger.

"Lawson," Eve said, using his last name with cutting emphasis, "you failed the air exams. If it hadn't been for that yellow streak, you'd be flying with Ken Barnes and the Patrol instead of being a cheap freight pusher. Now you're even worse than that."

She walked to the desk, tossing her white driver's gloves angrily on the glass top. Her step was as graceful as an aroused tigress. The crash helmet dropped back, releasing waves of smooth auburn hair. He watched her, fascinated by the taut, throbbing neck. Her spotless white uniform contrasted sharply against the browned skin.

Over Eve he had no control. For

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eight years she had taken every opportunity to mentally slap his face. This time the tirade left him without a word to say. Like any normal man, he had loved the girl from the first day he saw her. She handled the great fourteen wheel Diesels like sulky children, an object lesson in itself.

There wasn't a driver in the Trans-American string who hadn't at one time or another returned from a long haul with Eve at the duals, their cheeks and ears smarting. This angel of the transports was admired and coveted by every freight pusher from one end of the highway to the other.

Every attempt on her part to make what *she* considered a man of Lawson, had failed. He couldn't even with her own love for the road, convince the girl that something fine existed between a man and the throb of mighty Diesels at his finger tips. His place wasn't in the air.

He walked slowly past her, toward the door.

"Riley," his voice was almost gentle, "I'm going through on the night run. I'll take it alone, now that I know what to fight."

"The hell you will," Blackson shot back. "There isn't a truck that will move out of here until the Patrol cleans up this mess. I'm all through losing drivers."

Lawson looked at Eve. Her lips had shut in a hard, white line. No help there. He left quickly, closing the door with the feeling that something wonderful was hopelessly lost to him on the other side of it.

IT was late afternoon. The pounding on the door was faint and far away. Then it drummed louder against his ears. He sat up in bed.

"Huh . . . ?"

"Lawson, you in there?"

It was Erlich, Trans-American's chief dispatcher.

Lawson tossed the covers aside and reached the door in a jump. Erlich was excited.

"Blackson says you're to report at once," he shot out. "Oil fire on the coast—got to haul explosive . . ." He was gone, down the stairs as though the devil was at his heels.

Lawson dressed hurriedly, grabbed his crash helmet from the chair by the door. In the hall, he took three steps at a time, almost knocked the paper boy over as the kid came up the stairs. The newsboy turned about twice, found a quarter in his palm and a copy of the News missing.

Arrow, driving the plasticoupe with one hand, gulped down the headlines.

METEOR OIL FIELD ABLAZE

Now he knew Riley's reason for calling him. Explosives to be hauled. Trans-American still held its exclusive franchise for trucking all government-controlled dyno-glyc. He whipped the plasticoupe into the T-A garage and bounded upstairs to Blackson's office. Riley was pacing up the room's length, under a black cloud of despair. He turned as Lawson entered.

"Three hours ago the Patrol reported that the Meteor wells are burning," his voice was mechanical, measured like the beat of water. "Someone forgot to oil a pump—friction—and hell broke wide open on one of the derricks. In twenty-four hours the whole field will be gone."

"I saw the paper." Arrow waited.

"Twenty contracts canceled today," Blackson came to his side, one arm on the younger man's shoulder. "The All-Country council was on the teloscreen just before you came. I pleaded with them," his eyes faltered, went to the carpeted floor. "We either haul the dyno-glyc, or else."

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Lawson was thinking of the boys who had washed up on the road. With a load of the highest test glyc obtainable, the smallest accident might . . . Riley was talking to him.

"We got ourselves into this mess, boy," he pleaded. "I can't tell you to make the trip. I'm not young any more, and this outfit means all I have."

"I've been asking for it," Lawson said. "Is she ready to roll?"

TRANSPORT SIX, motors idling, stood at the edge of the main platform. A crew of men was hastily daubing the trailer with luminous red paint. Across the tail gate, stenciled three feet high, was the warning DANGER—DEATH ON WHEELS.

At the parts bench he stopped, searching for something. An extra metalode antenna stood in the corner. He picked it up, also slipped a small wrench into his pocket. Walking around the Diesel he kicked the tires carefully, looking for weak spots. Then he climbed quickly into the left seat. With the triple motors roaring he felt movement at his side. Shorty, dual man for "Six" would go through hell as long as Arrow sat at the controls. Without looking, he gunned the heavy power unit. Twisting the neck cord of the helmet, he adjusted it carefully. With all three speed buttons pressed in, "Six" roared up the incline like a bull elephant, charging toward the Trans-World highway.

The Diesel was hitting the necessary two-hundred per as it approached Translucent Highway. Eyes focused on the main line of traffic, he jerked the vibrator cord sharply. The current broke under the highway, and Trans-World turned a warning red.*

Traffic slowed as they zoomed into position on the left lane. Motioning Shorty to take the controls, Lawson locked his own. He bent over to study the route schedule. His eye caught the flash of white breeches, and roved upward, widening with surprise. Eve Blackson . . .

"What in—?"

"I know," her face was a mixture of hatred and pride at the little victory. "I'm not the dual man you expected, am I?"

"And why," he asked icily," am *I* honored with this unexpected pleasure?"

"It happens, *Mr.* Lawson, that this trip means everything to Dad. I'm going through to the Meteor. I'm not so sure that if I didn't the truck might get frightened and jump the road."

Her lip curled, and she sat very straight, looking ahead again as though the subject were closed. Arrow's mouth snapped shut. Riley Blackson allowed his only offspring to have her own way with everything. Right now, Lawson hoped they *would* get blown sky high. She had it coming to her.

THE plastic was stretching before them, passing speedily, smoothly under the singing wheels of the gigantic truck. Miles climbed on the speed indicator, eating up space between them and Half-way Station. With the cool green of the highway killing the burning heat in his eyes and calming his mind, Arrow admitted secretly that Eve would turn in a better accounting

* Because of intense speeds maintained on Translucent Trans-World Highway, the warning signal must be used when entering and leaving the traffic lane. Naturally there is a chance of collisions occurring if the traffic flow is interrupted in any way.

This traffic warning is controlled by a vibrator cord hung from the roof of each cab. When pulled, this cord makes electrical contact through vibration against an exposed cable on the surface of the highway at all entering points. The cable leads to the master switch, throwing off the green lights and causing the highway to turn red for a distance of ten miles to the rear.—Ed.

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for herself than any other driver he could have chosen. If only the girl wouldn't be so darn hard to get along with.

He saw the flashing signal of a patrol plane cutting in from the north. Bending over, his fingers switched on the teloscreen. It was Ken Barnes.

"Calling Six — Calling Transport Six," came the droning voice of the crack patrol scout.

"Six answering," Eve broke the silence." What's new, Ken?"

"You know what's new, you little hell-cat," his voice like an admonishing father's. "You get off the highway and back to the kitchen where you belong."

"Make me," Eve laughed, her voice tinkling teasingly. "I'm going through to West Station, Ken." She was serious again. "There aren't any rules to prevent it, so go peddle your papers, my boy."

"Arrow—"

"It's no use, Barnes," Lawson had long since given up. "If she wants to go, I can't stop her."

"But—"

Eve switched the screen off, abruptly.

"Ken's a sweet kid," she said dreamily, "but why can't you boys realize that I'm a big girl now, and know how to take care of myself?"

There was no doubt in Lawson's mind that she had grown up. He could have kicked himself for loving the rounded face, the cool sweep of her youthful body. Reaching down angrily, he switched the teloscreen on once more, in time to catch Ken sputtering something unfit for listening purposes. He cut the scout short.

"Ken," Arrow's voice had become brittle and curt. "I think that hunch of mine was right. If I'm on the beam, the thing that yanks out those antennas will tear the devil out of your static indicator if it hits it. Get out front and fly low. Cut your lights. Send us a warning if static starts acting up. I'll try and do the rest . . ."

"Right," the highway scout's shot back like a whip. "But don't blame me if it makes mincemeat out of that little spitfire, after I warned her."

Lawson locked his controls and sat hunched forward, watching Ken's plane. Already the scout was a long distance ahead, tearing along beneath the low clouds.

TRANSPORT SIX nosed ahead past the thousand-mile point. On through the dense blackness of night; up ramps that carried it smoothly over small towns nestled under the glassy surface; into open country once more . . .

Barnes was always ahead, and Arrow's eyes never left the shadow of plane. He tried to relax a little, his eyes aching from the all-night vigil. Beads of sweat were standing out on his forehead, and he wanted to sleep, for a minute, for hours. Then—against a curtain of black, a tiny red flare burned like a pin-prick of blood, faded.

The signal!

"Lock your wheel," his voice came mechanically. "Lock it and sit tight."

Eve hesitated. He turned on her savagely.

"Do you understand English, or do you want to burn in this tin furnace?" She complied.

Slowly, then with increasing power, they became aware of a humming, an angry drumming on the outside of the cab. Alone at the controls he clung to them grimly, the knuckles of his hands drained of blood. His foot lifted from the fuel feeder and they lost speed slowly. One hundred and ninety, eighty, seventy— At fifty miles they were creeping along. The highway went red. The pounding, sparking sound had become terrific, drowning out the engine. Dry,

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burning currents of electrified air filled the cab. Their scalps tingled and burned, throats parched. He was riding the brakes with all his strength now, cutting the speed as rapidly as he could. It was stifling hot. In another minute something had to break.

He twisted the wheel gently, bouncing the dyno-glyc laden truck off the highway and onto the smooth shoulder of gravel. At once the heat drained away through the huge wire-woven tires and the engine breathed normally. He looked at the girl. Her face was icy, two small hands clutched tightly in her lap.

"It's all over, kid," he said it kindly. "Switch on and let's get out of here."

DRIVING cautiously with the tractor swaying each foot of the way, Lawson put five miles between them and the scene of the unhuman fight. Then as they stopped, Ken's voice cut over the teloscreen.

"Still with me?" He was jubilant. "I was watching you. For a while I didn't do much breathing. Guess you licked 'em that time, fella'!"

The tiny plane was a scant ten feet overhead, hovering like a humming bird. Ken's head came over the side.

"Good God, Arrow," he gasped, "look at the antenna!"

Eve rose up, looking over Lawson's shoulder. The antenna was gone, jerked clear out of the cab body.

"You knew," she whispered. "You knew when it happened, and still you kept your speed up until we hit the center of that magnetic field."

"It was the only way I had of finding out for sure," he answered slowly. "I had a lead on the other boys, with some idea of what to expect."

The Diesel stopped, and he crawled out stiffly. Under the seat he found the extra metalode antenna and swiftly installed it in the empty socket.

"Rotten job," he straightened up, "but it'll have to do for tonight."

Looking up, he saw Ken's sky bug darting away toward the rainbow of light that was Half-way Station. No stop tonight, even for coffee. The fire fighters at Meteor would be waiting.

Hunching over the wheel he gunned the triple motors and snapped the speed buttons into high. The Diesel took the sudden weight without a murmur of protest, lifting the giant load from the shoulder of the road and down the main traffic lane once more.

"Get some sleep, Eve," he said it without looking around. "You'll be needing it before morning."

Without answering, she curled up on the broad leather cushion and closed her eyes.

IT must have been three in the morning when Arrow finally gave the wheel back to the girl. Exhausted with the strain, he hunched forward against the controls, his head nodding. It dropped to his chest, and Eve thoroughly awakened again, listened to him snore softly, then concentrated on the highway ahead.

At six Lawson still slept and snored peacefully. Suddenly, without warning, the girl jerked with all her weight on the traffic warning vibrator and climbed with both tiny feet on the brakes. The powerful suction of the wheels under pressure screeched the truck to a stop, throwing them both forward in the cab. On the highway a scant ten feet ahead of the halted transport stood a private plasticoupe. Arrow, rudely awakened, was out of the tractor striding toward the car. Eve was at his side, slapping her gloves angrily against her leg as she walked. To park a private car on the Translucent was a capital offense.

A woman leaned against the side of

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the coupe, her face frightened. She was frail, mud-covered, and the coarse, dirty hair that flailed about in the wind gave her a scarecrow appearance.

"I—I know I don't belong here," she was anticipating their thoughts, "but—but please help me. I was following the public roads, and became lost." She gestured hopelessly. "I found the Trans-world, and it was the only way. Now my car has stalled and I don't know what to do."

Other drivers were clustering around, muttering angrily. One of them, a Three-country freight driver, stepped forward.

"Let's get the lady's wheelbarrow off the road, boys," he shouted. A half dozen huskys gave him a hand. Lawson helped them.

"We'll tell someone to come back and give you a hand," he told her, not unkindly.

Transport Six nosed ahead again, swiftly. The warning signal released, a caravan of trucks followed at a safe distance from the load of dyno-glyc.

"Funny," Arrow said, "that woman getting on the highway like that."

"You're wonderful," Eve's voice cut like a knife. "When I first saw that car, the woman was crouching in the ditch. She saw I would stop in time, so she ran across the open space and made up a nice little story to tell us. I think she realized she'd never be able to get away before we found her, so she took a chance. That explains the phoney story and all the dirt on her clothes."

"It *could* be your imagination," he said.

"Not with what I know about women," Eve answered. "If they get lost in the middle of the night, they don't get out of the car and go wandering around in the underbrush tearing their clothing and slopping mud all over themselves."

"Guess you're right," he admitted.

"That," Eve grinned at him defiantly, "Is why I wanted to be along tonight. You don't seem to think very straight at times, and I'm glad I'm here to help you out."

Lips tight in anger, he turned to the business of guiding the transport and was silent.

THE Meteor oil field was a flaming holocaust. Mushrooming out over West Station, black smoke covered the entire country side. The roaring flames could be heard for miles. Viewed from the cab of Transport Six the fire was awe-inspiring.

In spite of himself, Arrow felt a surge of pride as he realized the trailer behind them carried the agent that would conquer this burning hell of oil.

They were both at the controls now, tired out with the events of the long night. The first traffic zones appeared. Lights were flashing on all sides. The sky patrol was out in full force, patrolling the traffic lane under the leadership of Ken Barnes. All cross traffic had been halted to let Transport Six pass. The atmosphere within the cab was strained to the breaking point. Eve, her body and mind exhausted, was still ready to fight. She refused to speak with Lawson, and he had no choice but to ignore her.

Suddenly Barnes flashed down from the main body of patrol ships and hovered over them.

Arrow switched on the teloscreen. Ken's voice was droning on, endlessly giving instructions.

"Transport Six proceed to Five Mile Point. Cycles will take your load. All traffic entering highway has stopped. You have clear road. No entrance switches open until further notice . . ."

He trailed off, darting ahead in the sky bug like a swift water beetle. Then

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he was back again.

"Change instructions—heat growing more intense. Stop at Six Mile Point. That is all . . ."

Even as he finished, a squad of cycles cut in behind them with a roar and spread out on either side of the speeding transport.

Fifteen Mile Point—

Eve locked her wheel and watched the curious strained faces of the drivers who were waiting for the dangerous load to pass. Every diesel driver in the country knew about Lawson's run with the dyno-glyc. They were holding their breath as the great truck careened by them on the last lap of the long journey against time.

Ten Mile Point.

Arrow started to press gently on the brakes, gradually increasing the pressure as the transport slowed. Nine-eight-seven . . . A gang of workmen was waiting as the truck halted. Handling the explosive as though in a nursery, they packed it into the cycles, which sped away toward the fire. They were carefully spaced, so that one accident would not destroy the entire load of precious glyc.

The foreman, a scarred-faced, middle-aged man, bronzed with the hard, outdoor life, came forward and took Arrow's hand. His other arm went affectionately around Eve's shoulder.

"Guess I'll be going in, now," he said. "Just thought I'd thank you both for a swell job. You know," his eyes softened for a moment, "This is the toughest blaze I've ever come up against. When I go in this morning, I'll be thinking a lot about the two drivers who made my fight possible."

He turned quickly, and walked away toward the last cycle.

ARROW spoke without looking away from his retreating figure.

"A swell fellow. He wouldn't be so proud of us, if he knew *how* well we work together, would he, *sweetheart?*"

Eve turned away toward the truck.

"Are you going in to the terminal?" she asked tightly.

"Go ahead," he called after her. "Ken will drop me off."

The truck roared into high, and swished past him so close that he stepped back to avoid its wheels. Ken had landed and was standing at his side.

"What's burning *her* up?" the scout asked.

"I'm not half as worried about her," Lawson answered, "As I am about the next driver who tries to bring a truck through on the Trans-world."

"Right now," Ken said, "you need rest. Let me drop you off at the Transport Club. Sleep for twenty-four hours, then you can tackle the other problem."

Arrow nodded.

"And in twenty-four hours, I'll be right back where I started from. I'll *still* be fighting something I know nothing about."

He felt better when Ken had landed the Sky Bug on top of the roof of the Transport Club. The hands of a kindly attendant had already removed his grimy driving suit.

"Give this guy a bed, and tie him to it for a while," Barnes told the attendant. "He needs rest."

The man chuckled.

"Guess he's earned it," he said. He shook Lawson's hand warmly. "The boys have heard about the fine run you and Miss Blackson made, sir. We're mighty proud of you both."

Lawson followed him down the long flight of steps to the club lobby.

* * *

EVE was feeling much better. Slipping out of the bath, she drew the

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semi-transparent folds of the electric heat-coat about her freshly perfumed body. The soothing current penetrated her skin, relaxing all the tiny, exhausted muscles of her silken back and arms. For the millionth time she thanked Daddy Blackson silently for building this little hideaway atop the terminal at West Station. The apartment was her one retreat from the careening transports and their sweaty, masculine drivers. She whirled swiftly before the big three-dimensional mirror and was quite satisfied with the image of herself.

Somewhere a door clicked loudly. It was the private entrance her father had built to the apartment. She stood stiff with alarm. A footstep sounded in the small back room. She walked smoothly, silently, like a tigress toward the sound. In the doorway she collided with a stout gentleman who was making a bold entrance to her little haven.

"Who . . .?" she managed to stammer.

"I *beg* your pardon, Miss Blackson," the stout one said, adjusting his clothing after the accident. "You *are* Eve Blackson, are you not?"

"It's none of your business who I am. Whoever *you* are, get out before I ring the alarm."

By now the over-weighted, bald-headed one had regained his composure.

"Don't be hasty," he dipped his shoulders in a courtly bow, looking very foolish in his attempt to appear humble. "I have a message from Mr. Lawson."

"I might *know* it would be him," she said. "What is it and then get out."

"One at a time, in their proper sequence." He drew a card from the pocket of the badly creased gray trousers and held it for her to read. "A *very* nasty dispatcher you have downstairs," he said.

She glanced at the card. JOHN CHESTERTON, TRANSPORT CLUB. A little more at ease now, she smiled at his ruddy, excited face. Dispatch had evidently questioned his entrance a bit roughly.

"What does Lawson want?"

"Mr. Lawson send his regards, and asks that you drive back to East Station alone. He plans to stay until the fire is under control."

A loud pounding sounded on the outer door.

"Eve, are you all right?"

Dispatch sounded very out of sorts. She pushed the door open and Dispatch stood there, anger written in hard lines on his browned face. With one hand he nursed a bulging head as he glared at Chesterton with murder in his eye.

"You'd better go now," she turned to the bearer of the message. "I won't vouch for your safety here much longer."

"I *did* hit him a rather nasty crack on the head," Chesterton admitted, making a hurried exit. Outside Dispatch evidently went into action. Eve slipped out of the robe. Why did Lawson always have to let her down? Ken didn't seem the type to pull a dirty trick like this on any girl, much less on her. She decided to waste no time in putting miles between herself and the man who loved fires so much he was willing to let her take a chance alone on the highway.

* * *

AT SEVEN thirty, Arrow emerged from his room at the Transport Club, dressed in a fresh driver's outfit. He ate at the counter in the small lunch room, then entered the teloscreen booth. The closing door established contact with the operator.

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"Station Please."

"Trans-American office, zone one," he directed.

Parts of screen pictures flashed before him. Then Dispatch appeared, a sour grin on his face.

"Hello, my pretty one," he greeted Lawson. "So you ain't fightin' fires after all?"

"Let me speak to Eve." Arrow wondered what had come over Dispatch.

The man studied him carefully for a minute.

"You'll have a tough time doing that, after sending her back to East Station alone."

"Sending her?" Arrow's face turned white. "Get this straight. I haven't sent Eve anywhere. If she's headed for home, you'd better have a transport ready to roll when I get there, or I'll scuttle you."

He slammed the door of the booth and rushed from the lobby.

Lawson was there before Dispatch could finish refueling. With the last of the oil draining in to the tank, he heard the whole story of Chesterton from Dispatch's willing lips. Eve was somewhere between West Station and Half-way, thinking that Lawson had willingly sent her out to death and even worse. He yanked the hose from the truck and sprang behind the controls.

For the second time that night a huge empty transport leaped from the yard of Trans-American's West Terminal and gained speed like a cumbersome hippo up the long ramp to Translucent Highway. With the truck out of sight, Dispatch went to the teloscreen and established contact with Riley Blackson at East Station.

HOPING the girl hadn't gained too much of a start, Arrow fed the transport all the fuel it could gulp down. Topping a rise on the prairie he spotted another truck just ahead. Could it be Eve? With the tail gate in sight, he could make out the words splashed across it. THREE-COUNTRY FREIGHT. This was the outfit at whose feet Riley Blackson was laying the blame for all his troubles. Why should Three-Country be pushing a dead head across country tonight, with every dock on the west coast overflowing with merchandise? He could tell from the sway of the truck it was empty. Follow the fellow for a few hundred miles and see what's up? That was the idea. He stepped hard on the fuel control and caught up.

After a few minutes the truck ahead started to act queerly. With each burst of speed, he could see the other driver increase his own as though to pull away. Racing on Trans-world was bad business. He sped on, keeping just behind Three-Country. It was speedily becoming a situation entirely unfunny to Arrow's latent sense of humor. The diesel roared wildly as he looked at the dial. Two hundred and seventy; seventy-five; two hundred eighty m.p.h. Well over the speed limit on normal runs, and yet he had to go faster to keep those vanishing tail lights in sight. At three hundred he had given the transport all it would take. The wheels sang like maddened hornets and every fiber of the big trailer groaned and twisted behind him. Something was bound to snap at this speed. He kept his foot tight to the floor and clung to the controls. Sweat beaded on his chin and dripped from the end of his nose. Then, with his eyes stuck to the lights ahead he realized the other driver had cracked.

The truck, barely visible through the heated, fogged glass seemed to double up like a jack rabbit and jump from the highway. The driver was making a desperate attempt to right it, as the

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red, warning flash of the road bed spelled disaster. Three-Country, whoever he might be, had jerked too hard on the pressure brakes. Hitting the road shoulder, the truck staggered, jumped high in the air and toppled end over end into a field. Flames burst from it, and Lawson, working with his own brakes, saw the mass fall like a slaughtered animal in the open farm land.

The transport under control, he stopped far down the road, and backed to where Three-Country had left the traffic lane. The body of the driver had been thrown clear of the wreckage. Crushed to a pulpy mess, it lay twisted completely around a big fence post. He walked toward it, knowing there was no hurry. The head of the corpse, large and bald, had been flattened and crushed by the impact. Turning away, Lawson saw a slip of paper projecting from the coat pocket. Steeling himself against the sight he bent over and drew the blood-soaked note from the coat. A card fell from his fingers and floated to the earth. He picked it up and read, *John Chesterton, Transport Club.*

* * *

SINCE Eve had left the freight yard at West Station, the strange feeling of impending disaster had clung over her. Something had been strangely familiar about the face of the man, John Chesterton; a face that she had seen somewhere before. Perhaps another, but like it in a manner that gave her the creeps. With Transport Six well out of the last protection zone she began to watch the Trans-world closely.

It was funny about Lawson. He wasn't usually *that* much of a heel. Perhaps she'd have better waited to hear from Lawson himself. Then high above her, Eve saw for the first time, the speck of a patrol ship that dogged her speeding truck. She switched on the teloscreen.

"That you, Ken?"

"Hello Jinx," Barnes answered promptly. "I had a hunch you'd be trying something smart. Reported back to Half-way, got bored with the wine and women, and what not, so here I am again."

"Arrow didn't like my company," Eve pouted a little. "So I'm just going home alone. Brave, aren't I?"

"Like the sweet dope you are," Ken shot back. "You'd better go back and wait for your boy friend."

"No can do," her voice hardened. "I'm heading for Dad Blackson, and fast, too."

She switched the screen off as Ken started to lecture. It would be no use to go limping back to Lawson with a thorn in her heart. He'd laugh at her, coming west again like a whipped puppy dog.

Once, a long time after she talked with Ken, she saw the bug again, winging along ahead of her. If it could only be Arrow up there watching out for her safety. She decided the lanky truck cow-boy was the most good for nothing man she'd ever bothered to fight with.

Half-way station loomed ahead with its magnificent luminous towers reaching upward from the flat countryside. Shaft upon shaft of multi-colored glassine buildings reaching toward the heavens. The haven of rest and amusement broke in two the long night drive from West to East Station. She cut the fuel and switched off all three motors.

DRIFTING as through a cloud, Transport Six silently coasted on the smooth highway into the heart of the rainbow city. Turning from the

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traffic lane she let it follow the mechanically controlled line of flashing "spot signals" down a maze of parking ramps and into its stall. Robot brakes eased Six to a halt and locked the wheel securely.

Easing her bone-tired body into a comfortable counter chair Eve watched the assortment of foods pass her on the conveyor. Coffee and sinkers, the old standby. She inserted the proper coins into the counter slot and released the steaming Java. With hot food inside, she felt better. Resting, she brooded over the strange Mr. Chesterton once more. More and more it seemed odd that Arrow would send a messenger, and not come to her himself. Half rising, she decided to call him on the telo. Then she slumped down again, picturing him grinning at her fears. Once before they had safely driven through that crazy magnetic field of death. She could do it again. The road ahead seemed to draw her. If there was to be a fight, get it over with.

Shrugging her shoulders decisively she arose. The odor of hot food followed her into the night air. Then, away from the warmth and security of the building her old fears multiplied. Tossing her head almost savagely, Eve strode straight to Transport Six.

* * *

LAWSON hadn't thought about Eve stopping at Half-way. Realizing the girl would be wild with anger, he felt that she would roll straight on to East Station, and home, without a stop.

Now, just east of the throbbing color of Half-way Station he was giving the truck all it could handle. Eve, pulling onto the highway a scant fifteen minutes behind him, gripped the wheel and settled down for the test, should it come.

The blood-soaked note on Chesterton'h body told Lawson a lot of things he'd been wanting to know. If he couldn't overtake the girl very soon now, he might live to regret the day he'd *ever* see her face again.

He knew it was Ken before he switched the screen on. The way that little bug came flashing down from the eastern sky told him that no one but Barnes would be at the controls. Ken seemed surprised to find Lawson in this truck.

"Hi, Cowboy," the scout greeted him. "Thought you were sleeping it off back at West Station. I had a lead on Eve. Guess she must have stopped off at Half-way. Came back to pick her up."

Arrow sighed in relief.

"That's the best news I've heard tonight," he said.

Ken grinned.

"Don't worry about *that* little girl, at least not as long as I'm around."

Lawson had slowed the diesel down, idling along under Ken's plane.

"Think I should drop back and find her?" he questioned.

"Might have a tough time getting near her the way she feels right now."

"Guess you're right," Arrow gunned the transport again. "I'll keep my eyes open, and you help Eve along, will you?"

"Right."

The telo went dark, and Lawson watched the bug turn off and slip behind.

The Trans-world pleasant at any other time, held a horror tonight that he'd have to face alone. The fact that he knew what might happen didn't make death seem any more pleasant.

There's a way of rolling a truck into the ditch, his mind pounded out. A way of tipping it over so the tractor will ride clear of the crushing weight be-

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hind. Perhaps a cool head and strong arms will do it. Perhaps—

WHEN the hell crashed in upon him, his mind worked like a smoothly ticking watch. With nerves turned to ice he carefully nursed the small dyno-glyc bomb on the cushion at his side. *Pull out the firing pin and compressed hell will bust wide open.*

At first the electro current hit the tractor gently like the sound of two live wires sputtering against each other. Increasing steadily the thing, whatever it was, seemed to come closer within range. Slowing down as much as he dared, Lawson drove steadily ahead, resisting the urge to leave the highway. To escape. That would save him once more, and leave the others to go on dying in vain. He clung grimly to the controls, rolling straight down the highway. The prickly, burning heat filled the cab and pulled at his hair. His head began to buzz wildly under the pressure. From the corner of his eye he watched the metalode antenna as it straightened out toward the edge of the highway. *Hold on.* He kept whispering it over and over, brushing the sweat from his eyes. *Hold on for a minute, two minutes more.*

The center of disturbance must be very close. His breath jerked out of him with difficulty, arms turned to lead against the wheel.

NOW!

His right arm pulled gently against the wheel, and the truck bounced from the highway. A red flash of the highway signal and he was tearing down a long, sharp incline toward the deep ditch. Pushing the door with his foot, he stepped to the running board, holding the glyc bomb in his right hand, the wheel with his left. Hanging there for seconds, he knew the time was near. He gripped the firing pin in his teeth and pulled savagely, at the same time twisting the wheel quickly under his hand.

With all the strength he could muster Lawson leaped headlong into the darkness. His legs like long pistons carried him clear of the cab as it skidded sidewise on the hard gravel. Panting and half dead with pain, he felt rather than saw, the big trailer roll by, missing his body by inches. Hugging the dirt, his arm and legs shredded painfully by the sharp stones, he saw the truck hit the bottom of the incline. Then a great flare of orange light lashed over him, the explosion deadening his ears.

The transport seemed to lift up, parts of it flying high in the air, then settle down again. A sigh escaped his lips as the darkness settled in. Somewhere on the ridge behind him a twig snapped. The highway was deserted, and laying stretched on the side of the hard bank he wondered dully if the scene had been convincing.

* * *

THREE people saw the explosion against the night sky. Eve Blackson, hurtling east, shuddered as the flash of light covered the highway ahead. Ken, above her, knew who was in the wrecked truck. His face didn't betray him as he switched on the teloscreen.

"Turn that crate around," he shouted at the girl. "Get back to Half-way, and wait. I'm going up and find out what happened."

"You know darn well what happened," Eve's lips were white. "I'm going along for the ride."

Ken swore loudly.

"Eve," he pleaded, "I can't be responsible any longer. "I'm doing my best to keep you out of a jam. Now, turn back."

He was talking to a dead screen. Eve was already far ahead.

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ON the little oak ridge, just above the spot where Lawson had cracked up, stood the third interested party. The woman looked just as bedraggled as she had the night before when Trans-world drivers had pushed her plasti-coupe from the highway. The coat, covered with dried mud flapped around her gaunt frame with a scarecrow attitude of disinterest. Her face was chalky with determination as she studied the road toward the west.

Bony hands clutched a queer, box-like contraption close to her breast. Not unlike a huge aerial camera, it had a large glassine lens pointing away from her body, crossed hair lines etched across its surface. She held the box to her body with two large handles, a trigger release buried under her right finger.

She looked down for an instant at the smouldering ruins of the wrecked truck, then studied the highway once more. Her ears had picked up the hum of Transport Six coming over the divide a few miles away. Over the oncoming truck, hanging high in air, a tiny flare, red as a drop of blood, flickered then died.

She lifted the box higher and inside it, tiny motors begans to hum softly. Six had dipped down a slope in the Trans-world and roared onward toward her hiding place. She aimed down the length of the machine and sighted the crossed hairs on the barrel sight.

The metalode antenna on the truck cab was plainly visible in the sight.

Something crushed down on her head, and a blinding stab of light raced through her brain. The box dropped to the ground and the woman sagged slowly and went limp among the damp leaves. Transport Six flashed past.

Lawson stepped back and tossed the huge cudgel from him in disgust. With his foot he rolled the woman over on her back. There was something unclean about her, like a rattlesnake crushed under a farmer's boot.

Six was slowing. Evidently Eve had seen the still burning truck, and stopped as soon as she could apply the full force of the brakes. He stood on the ridge, listening as the truck went into reverse and rolled back along the side of the road. It was the sky bug that demanded his attention, He watched another flare drop from it, and smiled softly as still another dripped red against the low clouds.

Eve had stopped now, and he heard her plainly as she cried out. The Trans-American insignia was still visible on its crushed side. Her feet slid down the gravel bank. The woman on the ground stirred and sat up feebly. A string of soft oaths escaped her lips.

"You dirty skunk," she muttered, glaring at him. "Hitting a lady with a club."

The footsteps below them stopped abruptly. Eve must have heard the sound.

"I wouldn't use anything *but* a club on a snake." He almost whispered it, in his hatred for her. "Get up." The words cut from his lips like the raw edge of a saw.

He bent over and grasped the magnetizing machine with one hand.

"Start walking," Lawson motioned toward the road.

"Eve," he shouted, his voice rocketing back and forth across the quiet woodland. "It's me, Arrow. Get back to the truck and wait. Ken's coming down."

The sky bug had nosed toward them swiftly. Ken would meet them on the highway.

Eve's voice floated back, all the fear and horror gone from it.

"Arrow," she called, "are you all right?"

It seemed the most natural thing in

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the world, after the terrors of the all night run, to find him here and to be glad he was safe.

THEY made a strange party, huddled ill at ease beside the great cross-nation truck. Lawson was still covered with the blood and dirt from his terrific fall from the truck. The woman of the plasticoupe stood to one side, her head hanging dejectedly, like a sulky child. Now and then her eyes darted from one side to the other, seeking an avenue of escape. Ken was having trouble trying to contact East Station on the truck's teloscreen.

"East Station— Calling East Station," he repeated over and over to the dead screen. Traffic had stopped on the highway. Many drivers on the run east had seen the explosion from Halfway station. They weren't anxious to follow. Ken's hands searched the controls of the telo.

"Try the screen in the sky bug," Arrow suggested.

"No good," Ken answered laconically. "It runs on the engine fuel. Tanks went dry as I landed."

The woman had waited patiently, sliding inch by inch toward the outer circle of the group. Suddenly a tiny nitro pistol flashed into her hand. She waved it hysterically.

"Run for it, Barnes," she shouted. "It's been a good show, but you'll never get through it."

Ken turned with an odd look of surprise. Then, with Arrow staring at him, he smiled. His features slightly reddened, he relaxed once more against the cushions of the seat.

"She's not only crazy," he said, "but she's got us in a hellish spot."

Lawson ignored him, turning with pin point eyes to the woman. He moved toward her slowly, his body stretching smoothly, stealthily, as though approaching a cobra.

"Stand back," the pistol poked at him savagely. "I'll blow that frame of yours to the moon."

Eve dashed between them, throwing herself against Arrow chest. Pressing her body close to his she looked up into Lawson's determined eyes.

"Leave her alone, darling," she pleaded. "She'll kill us all if you don't."

His gaze dropped to hers, and his heart skipped a beat at what he saw there. Then he looked away.

"You told Ken Barnes to run for it," he asked the woman. "What did you mean?"

EVE stepped back. The new hardness in his voice puzzled her. She was searching for something—anything to cling to.

The gun wavered a bit.

"Nothin'," the woman stammered. "Nothin', only I—"

Lawson forced her hand.

"Are you trying to get him out of this mess, now that your brothers failed to show up?"

Ken stood up abruptly. He walked away from the truck and behind the protection of the wavering nitro gun.

"Give up the ghost, Lawson," his voice had gone harsh, bitter. "What do you know about her brother."

A look of fright had crept over his handsome face.

Eve, wide-eyed at this turn of events, pressed her body against the smooth protection of the truck's side.

"Nothing much," Arrow said. "I found his body wrapped around a fence post back on the west run. There was a paper in his pocket that set me straight on a lot of things." The words came slowly, as he sought the effect of them on the faces of the pair before him.

The gun dropped with a thud by the

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roadside, and the woman started to cry softly. Arrow sprang for it, but too late. Ken beat him to the weapon, kicking Arrow a wicked blow on the shoulder with his heavy boot. Lawson fell back. The gun, steady this time, trained on his chest. Eve cried out, straining back as though to hide from these two facing each other with bursting hatred.

"Now, stay there," Ken snarled, "or *I'll* blast you, and quick."

He turned toward Eve.

"Why *sweetheart,*" the words dripped sarcasm, "you're not disappointed with your hero of the sky patrol?"

She stared straight at him, disgust welling into her eyes.

"Lawson," Barnes spoke evenly, "you weren't so dense after all. So you found John Sargent and the devil's contract I signed with him!"

"John Sargent—or Chesterton." Arrow answered. "One and the same to me."

"Chesterton," Eve's astonished voice broke in. "Why, he's the man—"

"Yes," Arrow walked to her, putting an arm about her slim waist. "The man who sent you out to die. Sargent, owner of Three-Country Freight, and part owner of Ken Barnes' life."

FOR a minute Barnes seemed to soften as he watched them.

"You're right," his voice was tired. "Sargent and this no-good sister of his had me on the spot. Years ago I bought stock in the outfit. They were going broke. I was going to lose every cent I had. They made me a part of this scheme to get Trans-American's business. My part was easy. This miserable excuse for a human being," he looked at Sargent's sister, weeping miserably with the news of her brother's death, "did the dirty work. Sargent developed the magnetic gun, and spotted your trucks as they left East Station. I picked them up on the highway and dropped a warning flare when they approached her hiding place. She did the rest of it."

He paused, making sure the gun was still trained on Lawson's body, then continued. "After the first time, I realized I was a murderer. After that it was too late to back out. They had me hooked."

"Which makes good talking," Lawson cut in, "but what are we going to do about it?"

"That's the hard part to decide." Ken relaxed a bit with the story off his mind, and grinned at his old friend. "I've always liked you two. As for Eve, if things had been different—"

"Leave Eve out of this."

"Okay," Ken agreed. "But I *do* like you. I hate like the devil to kill you unless it's necessary. The sky bug is dry. Give me fifteen minutes start in the transport, and you don't have much choice, and I'll cut off into strange country where you'll never see me again. Agreed?"

Arrow looked down at the girl clinging to him.

"We haven't a thing to say about it," she said, quietly.

"So, that's that."

Ken climbed quickly into the cab of Six, then saw the woman, her eyes pleading with him for escape.

"Come on," he said, disgustedly. "I might as well take my misery with me."

Transport Six caught the fuel eagerly, lunging forward on the highway. Standing close together they watched it carry from them what had been the ideal man. Eve's lips parted slightly, her mind seemingly undergoing a terrific strain.

"I'm afraid," she said, clutching his big hand.

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"Of what?" He took her in his arms, pushing her small chin up with a firm finger. "Somehow, I guess Ken will get the pay-off when the time catches up with him."

A shudder coursed through her small body. They listened to the roar of the diesel as it topped a distant hill.

THE sound floated back to them through the clear air, louder and louder as Six gathered momentum. Transport Six had reached its maximum speed when the explosion came. A great flash of orange light swept high in the air. The top of the world flew off. All that remained of the big truck shuddered apart and blundered its way into the ditch. Ripped apart by the blast, it toppled into a pitiful heap at the side of Trans-world.

Eve buried her head in the smoothness of Lawson's tunic and sobbed. For an instant his eyes widened with amazement. Hadn't they, after all, found the thing that had wrecked Trans-American's trucks? Then he looked at her face, and realized. Pushing her away at an arm's length he stared admiringly.

She brushed the tears from her face.

"It was terrible," she said. "But last night I made up my mind to help you somehow. When Ken was talking with you I backed against the antenna."

From her pocket she drew the small wrench he had used on the west bound trip.

"It wasn't much of a trick to bend the antenna away from ground contact with this," she said simply. "I hope it makes up for some of the terrible things I've said to you."

Lawson didn't answer at once. His lips were busy finding something that had troubled him from the first. Yes! Eve could be a firebrand of affection when she wanted to be.

Under their feet the highway had once more flashed its warning. He wondered vaguely if the red plastic was glowing because of the accident ahead, or did Eve's torrid lips have something to do with the blushing scarlet of Translucent Trans-world.

The End

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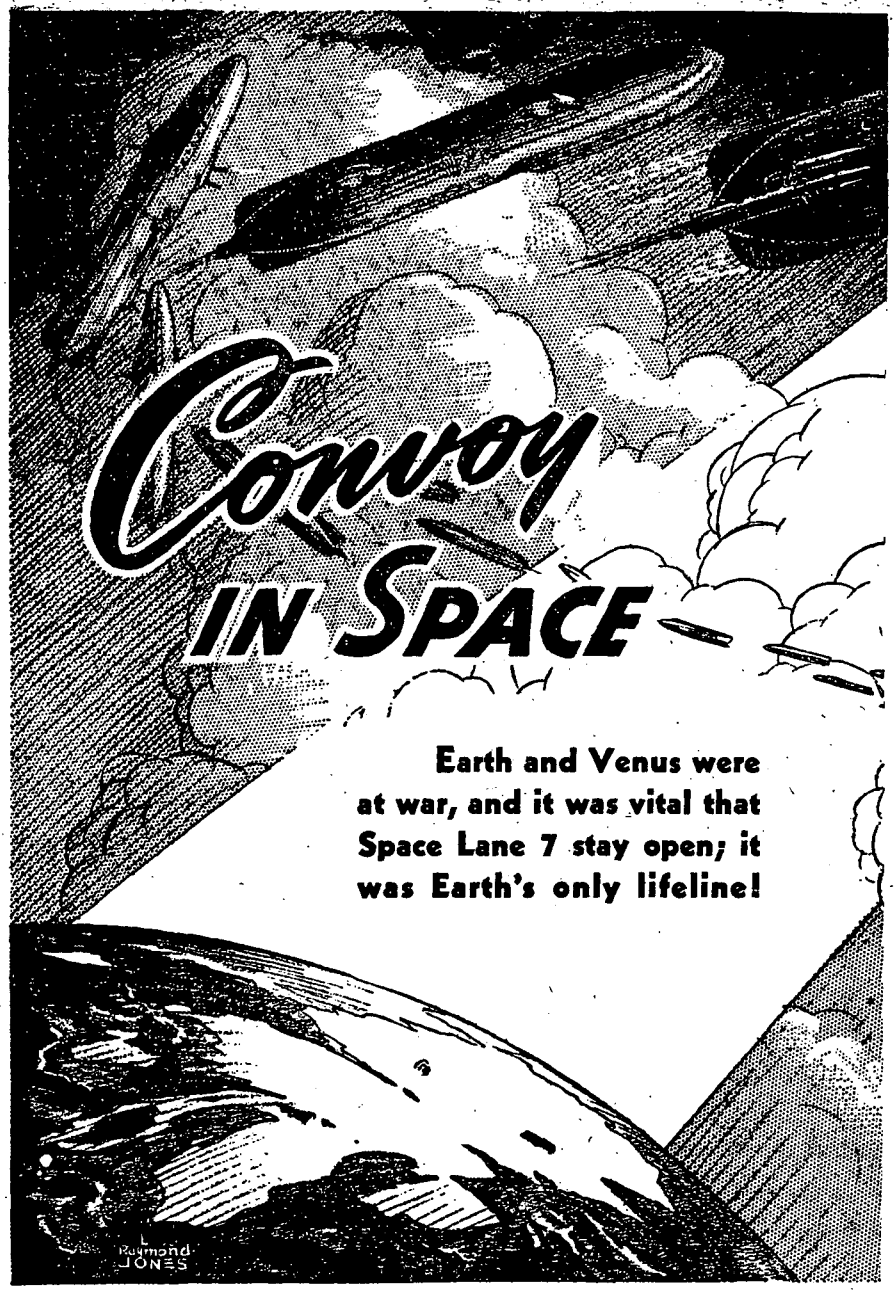
Convoy
IN SPACE
Earth and Venus were at war, and it was vital that Space Lane 7 stay open; it was Earth's only lifeline!
Raymond JONES

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by

WILLIAM P. McGIVERN

MACE McALLISTER was a big, deep chested man with a hard square face and an unruly thatch of brick red hair. Seated at the desk in his tiny dusty office with his big fists resting like mallets on the arms of his chair, he looked grim and angry.

As agent for the Intra-Planetary Space Freight Co. his job was to keep the vital flow of materials moving to the Earth troops marooned on Asteroid Belt 10—the first line of defense against the hordes of sub-human creatures from Venus. The only route to the all-important defense belt of asteroids was Space Lane 7—and keeping Lane 7 open and the supplies moving was Mace McAllister's headache.

He looked up as the office door banged open and a tall, lean dark-haired man entered and jerked off a leather helmet.

"There're not here yet," the new arrival announced.

"How the hell do they expect me to operate ships without pilots," Mace exploded. He banged a heavy fist on the desk top. "The brass hats have been

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promising me five replacement pilots for the last three months, and they're not here yet."

The dark-haired man shrugged and sat down on a chair near the wall. His face was thin and seamed with wrinkles; his blue-black eyes were inscrutable. He looked at Mace in silence.

"Reese," Mace addressed the other man quietly, and there was hint of weariness in his voice, "you've been blasting through Lane 7 for three months now, delivering the goods to the men on the Belt. The fact that you're still alive is a major miracle. None of the pilots who were here when you arrived are still alive."

Reese shrugged. "I'm a pretty good space pilot," he said quietly.

"You're a damn good pilot," Mace said. "The best I've ever had here. But without replacement we can't last much longer. You know that as well as I do."

Reese lit a cigarette, then said, "the replacement pilots are due today, aren't they?"

"Sure," Mace growled, "they're supposed to be here today, but they were also supposed to be here three months ago. All we get from Earth is promises."

"It's a long haul from Earth," Reese said. "Pretty hard trip in these times."

Mace stood up impatiently and started pacing.

"I know, I know," he said. "They've got just as tough a job as we have. This planetoid is midway between Earth and Venus and it's no snap when the fighter planes of every planet are blasting on sight at everything in the void. And why the hell should pilots volunteer to run the gauntlet of Lane 7?" he said with sudden bitterness. "It's a suicide trip, nothing else."

"I'm still alive," Reese said.

Mace looked at him. "You know your business," he said. "Some of these raw kids I get haven't even had combat training."

"They'll get it in Lane 7," Reese said.

"They'll get it in the neck," Mace said. He sat down again and jammed a pipe between his teeth. "We haven't sent any U-235 to the Belt for months," he said.

Reese put out his cigarette. "I noticed. What are you saving it for, the fourth of July?"

MACE shook his head and stared at his big fists.

"Can't take a chance on losing it. We have to be damn sure that stuff gets through. In another few weeks the men defending the Belt won't be able to fire their guns or operate their rocket ships. We've got damn near ten tons of U-235 here but it's all we're going to get for a while. If that gets blown up in Lane 7 it's curtains for the boys on the Asteroid Belt."

Reese nodded. His dark eyes were alive with interest.

"Why don't you let me take a crack at it? Load up the fastest ship you've got and I'll blast through alone. The Venusian scout ships won't be expecting a thing. I think it's worth a chance."

Mace shook his head. "Too risky," he said. "I've got another idea but it's no good unless I get some pilot replacements."

"Okay," Reese shrugged and lit another cigarette. "You're the boss."

"It's a nasty situation," Mace said. "If we don't keep Lane 7 open and supplies moving the men on the Asteroid Belt are as good as dead right now. In another few months Earth can get troop and space ship reinforcements out there—but if we don't get that U-235 to the Belt soon, reinforcements won't do any good."

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"You're right," Reese said quietly. "There won't be anybody left to reinforce."

Mace sighed and moodily regarded the scarred top of his desk.

"It's quite a responsibility," he said heavily. "It gets you at night when you try to sleep."

"Why don't you chuck it?" Reese asked.

Mace smiled wryly. "You can't run away from a thing just because it's tough. I learned that lesson in the void years ago."

"I didn't know you'd been a pilot," Reese said.

"I was commander of a Federation squadron for six years," Mace said. "Put in ten years with the Feds all together."

"A desk job must seem pretty tame after that," Reese said. There was a new glint of respect in his eyes as he looked at the other man. "The Federation patrols are damned exciting, I imagine."

Mace grinned reminiscently.

"And a lot of fun, too."

Reese said, "why did you leave?"

"Eyes and hands were slipping," Mace said heavily. "I didn't want to wash out so I resigned." He grinned wryly. "At thirty you're an old man in the Federation. That was three years ago."

REESE started to speak, then stopped and listened. A faint humming sound was barely audible in the warm office.

"There's a ship coming in," he said. "Might be our replacements."

Mace sprang to his feet and strode toward the door. There was an excited spark of hope in his eyes.

"Maybe," he said. "Maybe."

He jerked open the door and stepped outside onto the flasky soil of the planetoid. He saw that several men were standing by at the single mooring tower.

In the hazy dusk he could see the slim shape of a ship slicing through the planetoid's atmosphere. The bright sparks from its rocket exhausts left a trail of fiery streamers in its wake.

The repulsion rockets of the incoming ship blasted suddenly and the speed of the ship diminished perceptibly as its nose veered slightly toward the looming bulk of the planetoid's mooring tower.

Mace peered upward and tried to make out the ship's insignia.

Reese standing behind him said quietly, "that's your ship, all right."

"Can you see the markings?' Mace asked.

Reese said, "yes."

"You've got better eyes than I have," Mace growled. "Well thank the Lord they're here at last. We can use 'em. You'd better go over and take charge, Reese. Send the pilots here as soon as possible. I want to talk to them. And by God if any of them are still using teething rings I'll lose what's left of my mind."

Reese grinned and sauntered toward the mooring tower. Mace stood in the doorway for a few seconds, then he turned and entered his office. His jaw was hard as he sat down behind his desk. There was a big job ahead and now he had some men to do it.

CHAPTER II

Surprise!

MACE interviewed the five replacement pilots one at a time. The first three were young, but their records indicated that they were thoroughly competent. The fourth pilot was a short, chunky man with a red face and an easy grin.

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He was older than the others.

"Name's Wallace," he said, shaking hands with Mace.

"Glad to have you," Mace said. "This is no snap here, you know."

"So I've heard," Wallace said. He tossed a file of recordings on Mace's desk. "But I've been around quite a bit. I don't think I'll be dead weight here."

Mace went through the reports and found them excellent. The man had had a vast amount of experience in the void, that much was evident. He felt very grateful. He wasn't often this lucky in replacement pilots.

"Swell," he said. "Judging from this you'll be a big help. Reese will show your quarters and help you get settled."

Wallace nodded and walked to the door. "Shall I send the last pilot in?" he asked. There was a faint grin on his face that Mace didn't miss.

"Sure," he said. "What's funny?"

"Nothing," Wallace said. "Nothing at all." But he was still grinning as he walked out of the office.

Mace shook his head, puzzled. Then he went to work on the forms scattered about his desk. He was still absorbed in this work when the door opened and the fifth pilot walked in.

Mace looked up and his jaw fell disgustedly. The last of the replacement pilots was nothing but a kid, ridiculously small in bulky space clothes. White soft face with big brown eyes and a skin that wouldn't know a razor for several years.

Mace banged his fist on the desk in his disappointment.

"Who the hell sent you up here?" he barked. "This isn't a kindergarten, this is a fighting base."

"I'm aware of that," the pilot said quietly. "Perhaps you'd better look at my qualifications before you make up your mind about me."

MACE smothered his angry disappointment and grabbed the sheaf of credentials and licenses from the pilot's gloved hand.

He flipped through them quickly, grudgingly admitting to himself that they were all in order. Dale Mason, 22 years of age, extensive private craft experience, that was the gist of the data. This might not be so bad after all, Mace thought. Lord knows he'd gotten worse.

He looked up from the papers and his eyes opened wide. A ludicrous expression of stunned amazement spread slowly over his features.

For the pilot had removed the close-fitting leather helmet—revealing long, beautiful blue-black hair that fell in swirling waves to her shoulders.

Mace stared helplessly, unable to speak. His hard square features turned a slow red and his big hands balled into heavy fists.

"Is anything the matter?" the girl asked. She sat down and crossed her legs. Mace couldn't help noticing the lithe grace of her movements, but he was in no mood to be appreciative.

"You're damn right there is," he snapped. "Perhaps you can tell me the meaning of this joke."

The girl was lighting a cigarette. She looked up through a haze of blue smoke and said coolly, "what joke?"

Mace stood up angrily.

"I asked Earth for fighting pilots, not adolescent girls," he said bitterly. "This isn't a pink tea party I'm running here."

The girl's level brown eyes studied him calmly but her pale cheeks were lighted with points of angry color.

"My licenses and credentials are in order," she said. "My application was approved by the Earth selection bureau and I was appointed for service here. What more do you want?"

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Mace stared down at the girl, his jaw grim.

"Get this straight: I don't give one damn about Earth's selection bureau. They sent you up here, but I'm sending you back."

THE girl jumped to her feet, her eyes smouldering in her pale face.

"That's not fair," she cried. "You've got to at least give me a chance."

"Impossible," Mace said shortly. "It's too dangerous."

"Do you think I'm afraid of the risk?" the girl asked scornfully.

Mace looked at her a humorless smile on his lips.

"I wasn't thinking of you," he said. "I was thinking of the supplies and equipment. I can't risk a shipload of vital materials by putting them in the hands of a silly, romantic girl."

"I've had more actual experience than half of your pilots," the girl said stormily. "You're no right to discriminate against me just because I happen to be a woman."

Mace ran his hand through his rumpled red hair in an exasperated gesture.

"That's reason enough," he said ironically.

The girl picked up her leather helmet with a swift, angry motion.

"It's easy," she said, "for you to send me back to Earth. But what of your pilots who're operating short-handed right this minute? The guns on my ship might save one of those pilot's lives. And what of the men defending the Asteroid Belt? The supplies and ammunition I could bring there might save a hundred lives, might give some chance to men who don't have a chance now."

Mace frowned. The girl's arguments were hard to answer. Did he have the right to refuse *any* pilot who could help carry aid to the Asteroid Belt?

"I don't suppose those things concern you," the girl continued in a blaze of anger. "You sit here in a warm, safe office, far from any actual battle, and your stupid prejudice is keeping supplies on the ground when they might be heading for the Belt. But that doesn't bother you. As long as you're in a nice comfortable spot I suppose you're quite happy."

Mace fought to control his rising anger. He could feel the pulse at his temple throbbing heavily. If a man had spoken those words to him he would have broken him in two, but now he held himself in check.

"Is that all?" he asked.

"Yes, that's all," the girl answered. "You can send me back now whenever you like.

Mace regarded her steadily.

"I'm not going to send you back. Report to pilot's barracks and I'll see that a room is prepared for you. I'm going to take you at your word and give you some of the action you're asking for. I'll let you know when I want you. That's all."

The girl returned his gaze unwaveringly.

"I'll be ready," she said. She paused with her hand on the door. "I'm sorry you don't want me here, but I won't let that make any difference in my work."

Mace didn't answer and the girl left the office and closed the door after her.

MACE stood up and lit his pipe, a worried frown on his face. He paced up and down the small room for several moments, clouds of blue smoke billowing about his head. Finally he took his leather jacket from a peg on the wall and left the office. He walked to the pilot's barracks and stopped in front of the small shack occupied by Reese.

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He knocked and Reese's voice said, "come in."

Mace entered and nodded to Reese who was stretched out on a narrow iron cot.

Reese said, "What's up?"

Mace frowned and sat down.

"Hell to pay," he said. "We got a skirt with the last batch of pilots."

Reese smiled thinly. "So I noticed," he said.

"It's a problem," Mace said, sighing. "I won't use her unless I have to, but it looks like I might have to pretty damn soon. How many of our last convoy returned?"

"Three," Reese said. "We lost four ships and four pilots."

"Fortunately it was on the return trip," Mace said. "The material got through all right. But it leaves us short of pilots. If I send a convoy tomorrow I'll have to use the girl."

Reese raised himself on one elbow and lit a cigarette carefully. His thin-seamed face was sharp with interest, but his dark eyes were inscrutable.

"So?" he said softly.

"I don't want her to pilot the decoy ship," Mace said. "Can that be arranged?"

Reese shrugged. "Why not?" He grinned wickedly. "Any lottery can be fixed so why not this one?"

Mace reached into his inner pocket and drew out a shining black marble. He tossed it to Reese.

"Talk to the men. If it's not okay with them then the whole thing's off, understand? I can't very well ask them to take an extra chance on their lives, but you can."

Reese slipped the black marble into his pocket.

"I'll talk to 'em. There won't be any trouble."

Mace drew a relieved sigh.

"Thanks, Reese. I won't forget this. Talk to the men and then round up the girl and bring them all to my office. We'll hold the drawing in my office tonight to see who pilots the decoy ship on this trip."

"Okay," Reese said. "We'll be there in about an hour."

Mace nodded and walked to the door.

"Incidentally," he said, turning, "I didn't ask if this was all right with you."

Reese grinned wryly.

"It's okay with me. Leaving the girl out of the drawing for the decoy ship will slim down the odds a bit on the rest of us staying alive, but what the hell! I'm lucky."

"I hope you stay that way," Mace said. He left then.

CHAPTER III

Blackball!

MACE sat behind the desk in his office and blew clouds of smoke from the stubby black pipe in his teeth. He felt nervous and strangely tense. Reese had not shown up yet with the replacement pilots, but even as Mace was wondering about it, the office door banged open and Wallace entered with the three young replacement pilots following him.

Wallace's round, good-natured face was blandly curious.

"Action already?" he asked, smiling.

"Of a sort," Mace admitted. He motioned the four men to chairs and shoved a square earthen jug to the center of his desk.

Then he settled back in his chair and waited. He couldn't proceed until Reese and the girl showed up. This was one of the toughest jobs he had to face. Time after time he had sat here and watched a man draw a black marble from the earthen jug on his desk —and that black marble was the next

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thing to a death warrant. For the man who drew the one black marble was the man who piloted the decoy ship on the perilous trip through Lane 7.

He looked at the three young replacement pilots. They were all eager, anxious for battle. All clean-cut, courageous youngsters—heading for death.

Mace shook his head and puffed angrily on his pipe. Wallace, the oldest of this crop of replacements, was a little different story. He was a seasoned veteran, a man who had lived much of his life and for whom death would be just another adventure. But it was tough on these kids. And it was tougher on Mace to send them out trip after trip, knowing that some would never return.

His thoughts were interrupted by the entrance of the girl, Dale Mason, and Reese.

He nodded to them both, then swung his gaze around to the three young pilots and Wallace.

"We can go ahead now," he said quietly. He wondered fleetingly if Reese had talked to the men about the drawing. He flicked a glance toward Reese but he learned nothing from his thin, expressionless face.

He put his elbows on the desk and covered the top of the earthen jug with his two big hands. Everyone in the room was watching him intently.

"We're here to play a game," he said deliberately, "but before we go ahead I want to say a few things to you. With the exception of Reese, you men are preparing to make your first trip through Lane 7 to the Asteroid Belt. Your job is very simple in some respects. You take off from this planetoid and follow a beam directly to the mooring towers on the Belt. That's all there is to it. However, as you probably realize, hundreds of Venusian fighting ships are patrolling these areas, trying desperately to break this last supply route to the Belt. So far they haven't succeeded. They haven't succeeded because we're using a system that, so far, has gotten at least fifty per cent of our ships through. Reese here, has made practically every trip through Lane 7 in the last three months. I'm going to ask him to explain the system we use. He's better qualified for that than I am."

REESE lounged against the wall and lit a cigarette deliberately.

"It's not very intricate," he said quietly. "We simply send a dummy ship with the convoy. That ship is heavily armed but very slow. It is also the largest space ship in the convoy. Generally an old freighter. It falls behind the regular convoy and draws the fire of the Venusian ships. Its size, plus the fact that it is so heavily armed, serves to convince the enemy that it is a rich prize. Actually it is unloaded and manned by only one pilot. It's an easy target. That's all there is to it. The decoy ship is lost but the convoy gets through."

Mace looked around at the pilots.

"Understand?" he asked.

Wallace leaned back in his chair, smiling cheerfully.

"Sure," he drawled, "but doesn't the pilot of the decoy ship have any chance at all?"

"He has guns and ammunition," Mace answered. "Sometimes he gets through. Reese has had the decoy ship twenty times and he's still alive and kicking. But practically every other pilot who's taken the decoy ship out hasn't returned."

"I'm kind of lucky," Reese said quietly.

"Obviously," Wallace grinned.

"How do you decide who takes out the decoy ship?" Dale Mason asked.

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Mace looked briefly at her and noticed that her face was set in pale stiff lines. But her eyes and voice were steady.

He looked back to his hands which were still folded over the earthen jug.

"A good question, Miss Mason," he said. "The pilots making the convoy draw for it. In this jug under my hands are six marbles. They are all alike, except that one is black. The others are white. You six in this room will leave tomorrow morning at dawn for the Belt. Tonight you draw to determine who pilots the decoy ship. Fair enough?"

"Suits me," Wallace drawled.

"Certainly," Dale Mason said.

The three young pilots nodded.

"Ladies first," Mace said.

"Why?" Dale said quickly. "I don't want any special advantage."

"There'll be no advantage," Mace said patiently. "It's as easy to draw the black ball on the first try as it is next to last."

DALE looked uncertainly about the room and all of the men nodded their agreement. She shrugged her slim shoulders.

"If you want it that way," she agreed quietly.

Mace removed one hand from the mouth of the jug.

"Go ahead," he said. He had no worries about her drawing a black ball for there was no black ball in the jug. Reese had the black marble in his possession.

With set jaw the girl reached into the jug, but Mace could feel the trembling of her hand as it brushed against his own. He felt a moment of quick compassion for her. He had seen space hardened veterans blanch during this drawing. It was a pretty tough deal for a young girl.

She drew out a marble, looked at it, then rolled it on the desk. It was white.

"That eliminates you, Miss Mason," he said.

Reese stepped up to the desk.

"I'll take a crack at it now if no one minds," he said, with a faint grin.

The girl rubbed her forehead and turned away from the desk. She didn't see Reese slip a black marble from his pocket and drop it in the jug before drawing. But Mace did and he felt a sudden relief.

This was as good a plan as any. The girl would go first in future drawings and there would be no possibility of her drawing a black marble. Reese could follow her and drop the black marble into the jug before drawing himself. It was the only thing that he and the men could do. Sending men out to what was almost a certain and horrible death was bad enough, but none of them could look at themselves in the mirror if they sent a young girl to the same fate.

Reese shook the jug slightly to circulate the marbles, then drew. It was white.

"I said I was kind of lucky," he smiled.

"Obviously," Wallace said.

Reese tossed the white marble onto the desk and Wallace stepped up. "Let's see how lucky I am," he said. He reached into the jug and drew out a marble. He looked at it and the faint grin on his face faded. He stood for a moment, his fist closed tightly over the marble, then he rolled it onto the desk before Mace.

"Obviously not very," he said with a wry grin.

The marble that he had dropped from his hand was black.

MACE looked at Wallace carefully. "You're it," he said.

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Wallace shrugged carelessly.

"It's okay with me. Maybe I'll get through. Reese has been lucky. It might work that way with me. And anyway, who in hell wants to live forever?"

He sauntered to the door, a grin on his round, red face.

"See you in the morning," he said. He opened the door and walked into the darkness of the night.

"The rest of you had better turn in," Mace said. "Your ships will be ready in the morning."

The three young pilots filed out and the girl followed them. Mace motioned Reese to remain.

When the door had closed on the pilots he said to Reese, "Thanks a lot. I gather that you talked to the other men about the drawing."

Reese nodded. "They were all agreeable. As long as she draws first there's not a chance of her drawing a black marble. I go second, drop the black marble into the jug and the drawing goes on as normal."

"Fine," Mace said. "We'll keep it that way."

"Okay."

Reese strolled to the door.

"By the way are you shipping the U-235 tomorrow?"

"Nope. Can't take a chance. It'll have to be soon, though."

"The men on the Belt are running awfully short," Reese said idly.

"I'll have to figure something out," Mace said worriedly. "I don't want to send it in a regular shipment. I'm afraid the enemy will be getting wise to our decoy ship in a few more trips. Maybe on the next convoy I can work out something."

"Okay," Reese said, "see you in the morning."

"Good luck," Mace said. He went out, banging the door.

CHAPTER IV

Six Ships Into Space

THE next morning Mace stood at the door of his office and watched the six space freighters blast off, one by one, from the planetoid's central mooring tower. Reese was in the lead ship, followed by the girl. Mace watched anxiously as the slim speedy ship piloted by Dale Mason disappeared into the void, a shower of sparks trailing in its wake.

Wallace blasted off last. Piloting the lumbering, heavily armed decoy freighter. The first five ships had vanished into the void and were well on their way to Lane 7 when his ship roared sluggishly through the planetoid's atmosphere.

Mace jammed his hands into his pockets and entered his office. The six ships were gone now, heading for the treacherous dangers of Lane 7, and there was nothing he could do about it. He felt a moment of irritation as he stared at the work awaiting him at his desk.

He felt no stomach for forms and correspondence this morning. He lit his pipe and sat down heavily. A hell of a note. A hundred pound girl blasting through the void, carrying the vital supplies to the Belt while he sat at a desk charting courses and sending reports to Earth.

"Damn it!" he muttered.

He glowered at the confusion of his desk, his mind worrying the problem of how he was to get the desperately needed U-235 to the embattled men on the Belt.

He devised and discarded a dozen ideas without coming close to any solution. His thoughts were interrupted then by the jangling of the mail machine in the corner of the office.

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It was a square metal receptacle, constructed of heavy riveted steel. Inside the receptacle was a materialization unit which reassembled the dematerialized matter flashed through the void from Earth. Mace made the necessary adjustments on the receiving rheostats. A moment later a thin, wax-sealed letter slid into a groove at the base of the metal box.

Mace picked it up. It was addressed to Guy Wallace, care of Mace McAllister, agent Inter-Planetary Space Co. He thought of Wallace, blasting through the void at the controls of the decoy ship and he wondered if he would ever read this letter. He shook his head in irritation. Thinking like that didn't help anything. He tossed the letter onto his desk and went to work.

THREE days later, as the swirling hazy dusk was shrouding the planetoid, Mace walked out of his office and peered into the sky. A space ship was flashing into the planetoid's atmosphere. He found himself automatically clenching and unclenching his hands. This was the first of the convoy to return.

He barked out crisp orders to the ground mooring crews and kept his eyes glued on the in-coming ship. When the ship moored Mace walked toward the tower anxiously.

A long, bulky figure swung down from the hatch in the belly of the ship and Mace recognized the lean, fatigue-drawn features of Reese.

Mace walked up to him and Reese grinned faintly.

"Pretty tough trip," he said.

Mace asked the question he had dreaded to ask himself during the last three days.

"Did the girl get through?" He held his breath and his fists tightened as Reese pulled off his heavy helmet and lit a cigarette.

"The girl made it," Reese said. "She'll be in in a minute. She was only two or three degrees behind me."

Mace felt an illogical feeling of relief flooding over him. Why he should care so much for the safety of a girl he had only seen twice in his life was a question he couldn't answer.

"How about Wallace?" he asked.

"Didn't make the Belt," Reese answered matter-of-factly. "The rest got through okay. Lost two of those young replacement pilots on the way back."

"Damn," Mace swore softly. "Three out of six. We can't keep this up."

"The men on the Belt wanted to know about the U-235," Reese said. "The commander there said they can't last another week without it."

Mace's jaw hardened. "They'll get it," he said. "I think I've got a scheme doped out that might get it through."

"Good," Reese said, "what's the idea?"

"I'll tell you this evening. I'm going to have to send you back to the Belt tomorrow."

"Are you going to let me take the stuff alone?" Reese asked.

"That's not my idea," Mace said. "I'm going to send a complete convoy."

Reese looked disappointed, but he only said, "you're the boss," and walked away toward his sleeping shack.

MACE turned to a ground man. "When Miss Mason moors tell her I want to see her," he said. Then he strode to his office. In three or four minutes he heard the whistling shriek of a ship cutting through the planetoid's atmosphere, and five minutes after that his office door was opened and Dale Mason entered.

"Did you want to see me?" she asked.

Mace glanced up and noticed that she had removed the bulky space suit

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and was wearing a pair of slacks and a loose blouse. Her face seemed terribly pale. There were deep blue shadows under her eyes and drawn lines of fatigue about her mouth. She seemed strained to the limits of her endurance.

"Better sit down," suggested Mace. "You look tired."

"I'm all right," the girl said. But she moved to a chair and sat down. She leaned back and closed her eyes.

"How'd it go?" Mace asked.

"All right," the girl answered dully.

"Feel up to a trip tomorrow?"

The girl opened her eyes slowly. For an instant Mace thought she would protest, but then her jaw hardened into bitter lines.

"Sure, why not?"

"I'm sending a full convoy out tomorrow morning," Mace said. "We've got to get U-235 to the Belt."

The girl stood up and passed her hand wearily over her forehead. Her eyes were dull and sunken.

"All right," she said quietly. "I'll be ready."

She started for the door but before she reached it, her step faltered and she swayed. She put her hand to her eyes and took another step.

Mace shoved his chair back and jumped to his feet, but he was too late. The girl's knee's buckled and she fell limply to the floor.

Mace bent swiftly and gathered her slight form in his arms. Her head rolled limply against his shoulder as he shifted her into a chair. He crossed the room in two strides and filled a glass of water and returned to her side.

HOLDING her head in the crook of his arm he forced a few drops of water through her lips. Then he chaffed her wrists until her eyelids fluttered open.

"Easy now," Mace said gently.

The girl looked at him and then shook her head wearily.

"Did I faint?"

Mace nodded. "You're exhausted. You need about twelve good hours of sleep."

"It isn't that," the girl said. "I thought I was tough and hard when I came up here. But seeing those ships burned to cinders in the Lane got me. Those young pilots, just boys—it's too awful . . ."

She turned her face from Mace and began to sob.

Mace patted her shoulder awkwardly. There was nothing he could say that would help, so he remained silent.

After a while the girl stopped crying. She wiped her eyes with a handkerchief and stood up. Her swimming eyes avoided Mace's.

"Why don't you say it," she demanded, almost angrily. "I'm a silly, hysterical, adolescent girl, just as you said. Why don't you say 'I told you so'?"

"Because," Mace said quietly, "it isn't so. You've got guts and I'm the first to admit it. Now get to bed."

The girl turned to him slowly. The bitterness in her face faded. There was a dazed, incredulous light in her eyes. Her mouth was tremulous.

"I—"

"No more talk, now," Mace said. I'll see you in the morning. Are you still willing to hit the Lane again at Dawn?"

The girl smiled. It was the first time Mace had seen her smile and it lighted up her entire face with a soft glow. He realized suddenly that she was very beautiful.

"I'll be ready," she said. She opened the office door slowly and paused. "Thanks," she said quietly, then she stepped into the night.

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CHAPTER V

Lane 71

AT FIVE the next morning, Earth time, Mace sat behind his desk and studied the pilots who faced him. The office was cold and unpleasantly damp. Glaring light was provided from a single unshaded bulb in the ceiling.

Mace puffed on his pipe in silence. The earthen jug was before him on the desk with its contents of five white marbles concealed by a piece of paper.

Reese was lounging against a wall, next to the girl, Dale. Three other pilots were in the room. One of them was the remaining member of the recently arrived replacement group. Already, he looked older, hardened and slightly bitter.

Mace swung his eyes about the circle of faces.

"The trip you are making today," he said slowly, "is the most important convoy shipment we've ever sent. Ten tons of U-235 is being sent to the Belt. If we fail to get it there we're signing the death warrants of the men defending the Belt. You'll draw in the usual manner. Then I'll explain how we're going to get the U-235 through. Miss Mason, you're first."

The girl stepped to the desk, a faint smile on her lips. There was a peculiar expression of cynical amusement hovering about her eyes as she reached into the jug and selected a marble.

Mace knew that there was no black marble in the jug, but he couldn't fathom the girl's expression. It was as if she were laughing at them all. He frowned as the girl withdrew her hand. The marble was hidden in her small closed fist.

"Well?" he asked sharply. "What is it?"

The girl smiled slowly. "I appreciate what you men have done, but that's not the way I play."

Without glancing at the marble she tossed it on the desk in front of Mace. He looked at the marble bewilderedly.

For it was black!

Mace looked sharply at Reese. "There's been some mistake," he said quickly.

REESE walked to the desk, for once his expressionless poise broken. His eyes were excited and a bead of sweat stood out on his forehead.

"I'll say there has been," he said grimly. He reached into his pocket and flipped another marble onto the desk. It also was black.

He turned to the girl, almost angrily. "What's the idea?" he demanded.

The girl looked at Reese and then glanced at the other pilots. She was smiling.

"I know you men decided to save me from drawing the decoy ship," she said softly. "It was swell of you but—it isn't right. I've got to take my chances along with everyone else. I'd be dead weight if I didn't. I unintentionally overheard a conversation between two pilots and I learned then that the black ball was to be removed before I drew. So I got another black ball." She turned to Mace. "I took it out of your desk drawer. I hope you won't mind. I had it in my hand when I reached into the jug. And that settles it. I pilot the decoy ship."

"But you didn't have a chance," Reese protested angrily. "You knew you were going to draw the black ball. You held it in your hand all the time."

"That's right," the girl said. "That was the only way I could make up for the break you gave me on the first drawing. That time I couldn't have drawn the black marble because it wasn't in the jug when I drew. This

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time I had to make sure I drew it."

Reese's face was strained.

"You'll be shot down without a chance," he said hoarsely. "I refuse to let you do it. I'll pilot the ship myself."

"No," the girl said, "I can't let you."

"You must," Reese said anxiously. "I insist."

Mace had sat in silence, watching the scene. Now he said, "just a minute Reese."

Reese turned and glared at him.

"You aren't going to let her go through with foolishness, are you?"

"Yes," Mace said, "I am. And if everyone will calm down I'll tell you why. We aren't using a decoy ship this trip. I've changed our plans in order to get the U-235 through to the Belt."

The girl turned to him in sudden anger.

"Where does that leave me?" she demanded.

MACE fought for patience. "Listen and you'll soon know," he said. "Instead of using the empty freighter as a decoy we're going to load it with the shipment of U-235, double its rocket power and blast it through Lane 7 under full speed. The idea is this: The enemy has become accustomed to attacking the decoy, the clumsy freighter that brings up the rear of the convoy. This time the freighter —souped-up with extra power—will lead the convoy into Lane 7 and blast for the Belt. Sheer surprise is the big factor in the favor of the ship getting through. Miss Mason seems to be the one slated to pilot that ship."

Reese said, "How do you figure that?"

"Simple. She drew the black ball that gave her the decoy freighter. The decoy freighter is the one used for the U-235. Same ship, different assignment, that's all."

"It's too dangerous for a girl," Reese protested. His thin face was darkly angry.

"It's not a particularly dangerous run," Mace said. "In fact the pilot with the U-235 shipment has the best chance of getting through."

"It's a big job for a girl," Reese said. "Do you think she be able to handle it."

Mace stood up and looked at Reese.

"I'm the judge of that," he said quietly. "You aren't forgetting, are you, who the hell's running this show?"

The blank expressionless mask slipped again over Reese's thin face. But his dark eyes were smouldering.

"I haven't forgotten," he said. "You're the boss."

"It's a good thing to remember," Mace said. He looked at the other pilots. "You're leaving as soon as possible." To the girl he said, "the decoy freighter has been loaded with the U-235. Test your extra rocket power before you get to the Lane, then give the ship all she'll take."

She nodded quietly and slipped on her helmet.

The three pilots filed out of the door. Reese, with an inscrutable glance at the girl, followed them. Mace put his hand on the girl's arm.

"No point in telling you how important this is," he said. "You realize that. This isn't a fight talk. I just want to say 'good luck.' "

"Thanks," the girl said softly. She seemed about to speak, then she turned suddenly and slipped through the door.

CHAPTER VI

Treachery!

MACE stood in the doorway of his office until the five-ship convoy

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had disappeared into the trackless depths of the void. As usual the clumsy, bulky freighter had blasted-off last—but this time the powerful rear propulsion rockets of the decoy had hurled the ship away like a thunderbolt. With the girl at the controls it would soon overtake the regular convoy and when the flotilla reached the hazardous Lane 7, it would flash into the lead. That, at least, was the plan.

With a scowl on his face Mace returned to his desk. Something vague and nebulous was plucking at his mind, disturbing him strangely.

He couldn't figure out what it was. He shook his head in irritation and plunged into the work of bringing some order to the scattered reports on his desk.

In a few minutes he came to the letter that had been sent from Earth to Guy Wallace, the replacement pilot who had been lost on his first trip to the Asteroid Belt. He had forgotten about it completely. He turned it over, then held it to the light. It bore no return address and it apparently contained an ordinary correspondence paper.

He shrugged and slit open the envelope. He spread open the letter and his eyes widened as he recognized the official crest of the Federation on the paper. The letter read:

Wallace:

Proceed at once with arrest. Reports here confirm your suspicions. Urgent that you act immediately. Ackerman, alias, Reese, definitely in league with enemy. Proceed with full authority.

The letter was signed by Lieutenant Sheffield, commander of Earth Intelligence.

Mace rose to his feet, his hands gripping the edge of the desk. His mind was swept by a maelstrom of conflicting thoughts. The full impact of the letter was like a stunning physical blow. He felt a weakening nausea.

Reese a traitor!

It couldn't be possible! There was some ghastly mistake. There must be! But the evidence of this letter was damning.

WITH an oath, Mace jammed the letter into his pocket and charged out of the office. He didn't stop running until he reached the shack where Reese had slept. Jerking open the door he stepped inside and a cold fist of terror closed over his heart.

Reese's room was stripped bare. Clothes, papers, equipment, instruments—everything was gone!

Mace stood in the center of the small room, feet spread wide, trying desperately to adjust himself to the horror of the situation. Bit by bit scraps of conversation, pieces of incidents returned to him, falling into the place with damning precision, until the jumbled jigsaw was complete.

Reese had been after the U-235. That seemed definite. Mace groaned as he remembered Reese's eagerness to make the flight with the precious explosive alone. Failing in that he had undoubtedly learned of Mace's plan to send the U-235 in the decoy ship and had planned to draw the black ball himself—the black ball that would have given him the pilot-ship of the decoy freighter. The girl's drawing the black ball had blocked that scheme, but Reese hadn't given up. Mace remembered with sickening clarity how Reese had argued with the girl to let him take the job of piloting the decoy ship. Argued, almost desperately, to get control of the vital load of U-235.

Mace remembered the look in Reese's eyes as he stared at the girl

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when leaving—and he knew that Reese was not through yet.

The space freighter of U-235, with the girl at the controls, was far into the void by now, far ahead of the regular convoy but, Mace knew that Reese, with the second fastest ship in the convoy would be trailing her as relentlessly as a hungry shark.

What chance would the girl have against Reese? Reese was one of the deadliest space fighters that the void had ever produced, as cold and cunning as a snake. And Mace knew that Reese wouldn't bat an eyelid at blasting the freighter into a cinder if it would keep the vital supplies from reaching the men on the Belt.

A BITTER raging anger swelled up inside Mace. He left Reese's room and strode across the field to the mooring tower that encased the emergency space fighter. His great hands were clenching and unclenching with savage anticipation.

He snapped orders to a mechanic.

"Prepare this ship for an immediate blast-off. Check everything. Especially the firing panels and guns. Snap into it!"

The mechanic took one startled look at Mace's grim face and nodded rapidly.

"Yes, sir. Right away, sir."

Mace charged into his office and emerged a few moments later wearing a bulky space suit and carrying his space helmet in one big hand.

The mechanic said, "Your ship's all set, sir."

Mace nodded to the man and sprang up to the mooring tower and clambered into the ship. In the forward control room he slapped shut the automatic locks that hermetically sealed the opening in the belly of the ship.

Quickly he checked the controls. Everything was set. He flashed a signal to the mooring tower and shoved the firing lever into place. The next instant, as the rear propulsion rockets roared into action, the ship blasted out of the tower and streaked into the void. . . .

Forty minutes later Mace sighted the rear ships of the convoy in his front visi-screen. They appeared only as specks of black against white, but they grew larger with each minute. He counted them carefully. Three ships. That left two unaccounted for. That meant the girl and Reese had outdistanced the rest of the convoy.

Mace swore and stepped up his speed to the last notch. The roar of the rockets rose to a throbbing blast and the slim, bullet-like ship spurted ahead under the sudden burst of power.

In five minutes his flashing speed had brought him within space wireless range of the convoy. He plugged in his equipment.

"McAllister calling," he snapped into the transmitter. "Where is Reese?"

An instant later a pilot's voice droned back, "Convoy ship 2 calling. Reese followed ship 1 into Lane 7. Intended to provide a fighter escort if necessary for freighter carrying U-235."

Mace cut off the space wireless with a vicious snap. The girl had blasted into the Lane 7 and Reese was right alongside of her. At any moment he could burn her ship out of the void with one blast of his guns.

MACE was abreast of the convoy now, and in a few moments they were falling behind him, vanishing into invisibility on the rear visi-screen. Ahead of him stretched the Lane that the convoys followed to the Asteroid Belt—Lane 7. But his forward visi-screens were blank. Reese and the

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girl were a long way ahead of him.

Mace flashed along for another hour, watching carefully for the blood-red enemy ships. His worried eyes were glued to the visi-screens, but nothing came into their range.

Suddenly he strained forward. For a second he had seen a slim streaking object disappearing out of the lateral range of the front visi-screen. The ship—if it had been a ship—must have been leaving Lane 7, blasting off the known pathway into the trackless maze of the void.

Mace ran a worried hand through his hair. He closed his eyes for a second and then opened them and studied the screen again. It was completely blank. His eyes were burning with the strain of his intent scrutiny of the visi-screen. He cursed helplessly. He couldn't be sure that he had seen anything on the screen. Years of facing the blinding glare of burning suns had taken their toll from his eyes.

For minutes he studied the screen but he saw nothing else. When he reached the approximate location where he had seen the ship he hesitated a moment, checking the speed of the ship slightly. If he left the Lane on a wild-goose chase into the void, he'd never catch Reese and the girl. That was the chance he'd have to take. With a prayer in his heart he picked up speed, banked the ship sharply to the left and rocketed from Lane 7 into the uncharted void.

He continued on a dead-ahead course for several minutes, then he began sweeping back and forth in wide circles to cover as much territory as possible. The visi-screen remained blank.

An hour later his jaw was clamped grimly. Worried lines furrowed his brow. He was thousands of miles from the lane now, thousands of miles deep in the fathomless maze of outer space. And he had seen nothing yet!

A helpless feeling of despair swept over him. His chances were one in millions of stumbling on the ship he'd seen leaving Lane 7.

The most maddening fact was that he couldn't be sure he *had* seen a ship in the first place. It might have been an illusion caused by his weak, strained eyes.

HE SEARCHED the blank visi-screens with almost a desperate urgency. There were no evidences of space craft, but he leaned forward suddenly as he saw the vague shape of a tiny asteroid coming into range. The thing that caught his attention was not the existence of the asteroid—he'd seen dozens since he'd left the Lane—but rather the filmly edge of the asteroid that indicated the presence of an atmosphere.

Mace's pulses pounded excitedly. This was the only spot he'd seen so far that was potentially capable of supporting human life.

He swung the nose of the ship around and cut his rocket power. In a sweeping arc he hurtled toward the slowly rotating asteroid, watching tensely as the tiny globe of matter grew larger and larger in the visi-screen plates.

When he flashed into the asteroid's atmosphere he could hear the shrieking whistle of its friction against the metal sides of his ship. He levelled out and switched in both forward repulsion rockets as the ground of the asteroid rose up to meet him. Braked, the ship bucked like a reined horse, then continued on at a moderate speed.

Mace saw the rocky, craggy surface of the asteroid through the *duraglass* observation window under his feet. There was no sign of life visible on the hostile, barren earth of the asteroid, but as he pulled the ship out of its dive

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and zoomed upward, he saw a sight that sent a fierce exultation pounding through his veins.

Two space ships were moored side by side next to a small cluster of buildings on the asteroid. And Mace recognized both of those ships. One was the freighter the girl had set out for the Belt with; the other was the slim fighter Reese had piloted!

The panoramic scene flashed into his vision and was gone even more rapidly as his ship blasted up and out of the asteroid's atmosphere.

An exultant satisfaction was drumming in his body as he swung the ship about in a tight loop and dove back toward the asteroid. His fingers tightened over the levers that controlled the ship's deadly atomic cannons. He fired a trial blast as he rocketed downward. A savage delight gripped him as he saw the long white beams of atomic force strike out from the nose of the ship and cleave smoking passages through the asteroid's atmosphere.

WHEN he levelled from his screaming dive he saw that Reese's slim fighter was ready for flight. And as he blasted again into space he heard a throbbing detonation from the asteroid. And he knew that Reese had heard him, seen him, and was void-bound to meet him.

Mace shoved the tangled mass of hair from his eyes with a suddenly nervous hand. Everything depended on the outcome of this engagement in space. Five years ago he would have welcomed the battle eagerly. But he knew now that his eyes and his hands were lacking the certainty of half a decade ago. He wasn't afraid for himself. But the life of Dale Mason and the lives of the gallantly battling men on the Belt were in his hands, along with his own. And Reese was one of the most savage and coldly vicious space fighters that the void had ever produced.

Mace swung the ship about and circled the asteroid and, as he did, he saw Reese's slim fighter slash through the atmosphere into the void, a trail of bright sparks dropping from its rocket exhausts.

Reese's ship climbed above him and Mace circled warily, tensely awaiting the diving attack that was sure to come. In the visi-screen above his head he saw Reese's ship wheel in a tight bank and drop toward him, gaining speed with every second. This was it!

Mace waited until the last possible minute, then he gunned his ship furiously and shot under Reese's drive. Long blasting bolts of atomic force speared at him from the nose of Reese's ship almost scoring direct hits on his rear rockets. Mace zoomed desperately away from the lance-like blasts. He shook his head in helpless anger. He had almost delayed too long that time. His eyes, his weakened, uncertain eyes, had almost betrayed him. He had completely misjudged the speed of Reese's ship in that maneuver. And, in the void, a man is allowed only one or two mistakes in misjudgment.

Reese was circling, pulling out of his dive in a fast tight loop and heading back now, aiming for an attack on the tail of Mace's ship.

MACE escaped by a quick bank that threw him unexpectedly on the offensive. His fingers tightened convulsively on the firing control levers. Reese's ship was directly in his fore visi-screen as the long thundering bolts of atomic power shot out from the nose of Mace's ship.

But both shots were wide. And before Mace could fire again Reese's ship had slipped from range. Mace swore

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helplessly. That had been his chance. But he had muffed it completely.

Reese was back again, cannons thundering a dirge of death. Mace squirmed out of range and ran for it; there was nothing else he could do. Reese fought with a cold, diabolical ruthlessness that was unnerving. Mace twisted, saw Reese's ship creeping inexorably on him in the rear screen.

For another ten seconds Mace fled desperately; then something within him rebelled. His jaw tightened grimly. With an almost savage gesture he swung the ship about in a straining bank and headed back for Reese.

The two ships rushed toward each other like meteors.

Mace bared his teeth in a vicious grin and closed his fists over the firing controls. He was too old to start running from trouble. This might be his last flight but he would go out facing the enemy, and not with a shot in his back.

He gunned the ship for more speed, even cutting in the emergency rockets. The ship leaped forward like a slim piece of flashing quicksilver. The distance between the onrushing ships narrowed with breath-taking suddenness.

Mace could see the nose of Reese's ship rushing at him in the visi-screen. They were only seconds away.

Mace gritted his jaw and closed his hands on the firing control. The long lances of atomic power blasted from the nose of his ship with incredible speed.

He was almost on top of Reese now. With a savage snarl he jammed the firing lever into place and braced himself for the blinding, shattering, inevitable collision.

The nose of Reese's ship rushed at him, and then, at the last fractional instant, it turned aside—and Mace's deadly, blasting cannons raked the ship from nose to tail, transforming it in one second to a blazing mass of disintegrating matter.

Mace swung his ship around carefully and watched the flashing cinders drifting where once had flashed a trim, beautiful ship.

He wiped his damp forehead with a trembling hand. Reese had faltered in that last collision drive and his maneuver had brought his ship into the blasting range of his cannons.

Mace headed for the asteroid. He felt weak and shaken. It hadn't been skill or ability or cunning that had saved his life and all he was fighting for. Those things had deserted him long ago. He had been saved by the one thing that never deserts a man. He had been saved by sheer guts.

He lowered the nose of the ship into the asteroid's atmosphere—wondering what he would find. . . .

HE MOORED the ship and crawled through the sliding door in its belly and dropped to the flaky soil of the asteroid. His hand closed tightly on the electric gun at his belt as he crouched under the shadow of his ship, listening.

Drawing the gun, he cat-footed along the side of one of the metal buildings. He turned the corner and collided with a space-suited figure.

The figure stumbled against him.

"Oh, Mace, I knew you'd get here," a muffled voice sobbed against his chest.

Mace took the girl by the shoulders.

"Don't cry," he said. "I came as soon as I learned about Reese."

The girl's lustrously dark hair was blown in disarray about her damp cheeks. Her wrists were bound behind her.

Mace untied her quickly.

"Anyone else around here?" he asked.

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"No. This was evidently Reese's meeting place with the enemy."

"Is the U-235 safe?" Mace demanded.

"Yes. It's still in the freighter. Reese threatened to shoot me down if I didn't follow him here. I couldn't think of anything else to do."

"You did just right," Mace said.

"We had just arrived when we heard your ship. Then you flashed over our heads and Reese, after tying me, went up to meet you."

"We can't waste any more time talking," Mace said. "We have to get the U-235 to the Belt. You fly the freighter and I'll follow you. I've still got plenty of ammunition left in case you run into trouble."

THE girl chaffed her wrists to restore the circulation. "All right," she said. She turned slightly from him and her eyes dropped to the ground. "I want to apologize," she said miserably, "for what I said the night I arrived. What a small, rotten little person you must have thought I was."

Mace smiled faintly.

"That's right," he said mildly.

The girl turned and faced him, eyes blazing. She stamped her foot angrily. "You don't have to make it harder for me," she said. "It's bad enough as it is. You're so cold, so emotionless—"

Mace continued to smile. He put his hands gently on the girl's shoulders.

"If I seem that way," he said, "it's only because I'm thinking more of the job than of the people doing it. Maybe I'm funny, but I think the job is more important than the people. But when the job's over I can be quite a different person."

"When is the job going to be over?" Gail demanded.

"This job," Mace said, grinning crookedly, "will be over when we deliver the U-235 and get back to the home planetoid. After that," he said, looking deeply into her eyes, "you won't have any complaints about the coldness of my attitude."

"Is that a promise?" the girl said, a little breathlessly.

"What do you think?" Mace said.

He took her arm then and they strode toward the space ships, smiling at each other.

THE END.

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DWELLERS OF

TENSION crackled through the crowded emergency elevator. The faces of the passengers were like smears of wax under the light's glare. Taney's fingers were unsteady on the lever as he sought Eric Balt's eyes.

"All set, sir?" his voice trembled a little.

"Let's go."

In Eric's ears the shrieking of emergency sirens in the street faded swiftly as the car plunged. His gaze strayed to the chunky man at the controls. Taney was scared. Atomic Power Plant Eighteen was no kindergarten to work in.

"How many men down there, Taney?" Eric asked quietly.

"Twenty, sir," said Taney. "I went over everything this morning, sir. Prior will vouch for that."

"Compressors? Gauges?"

"Checked them best I could," Taney

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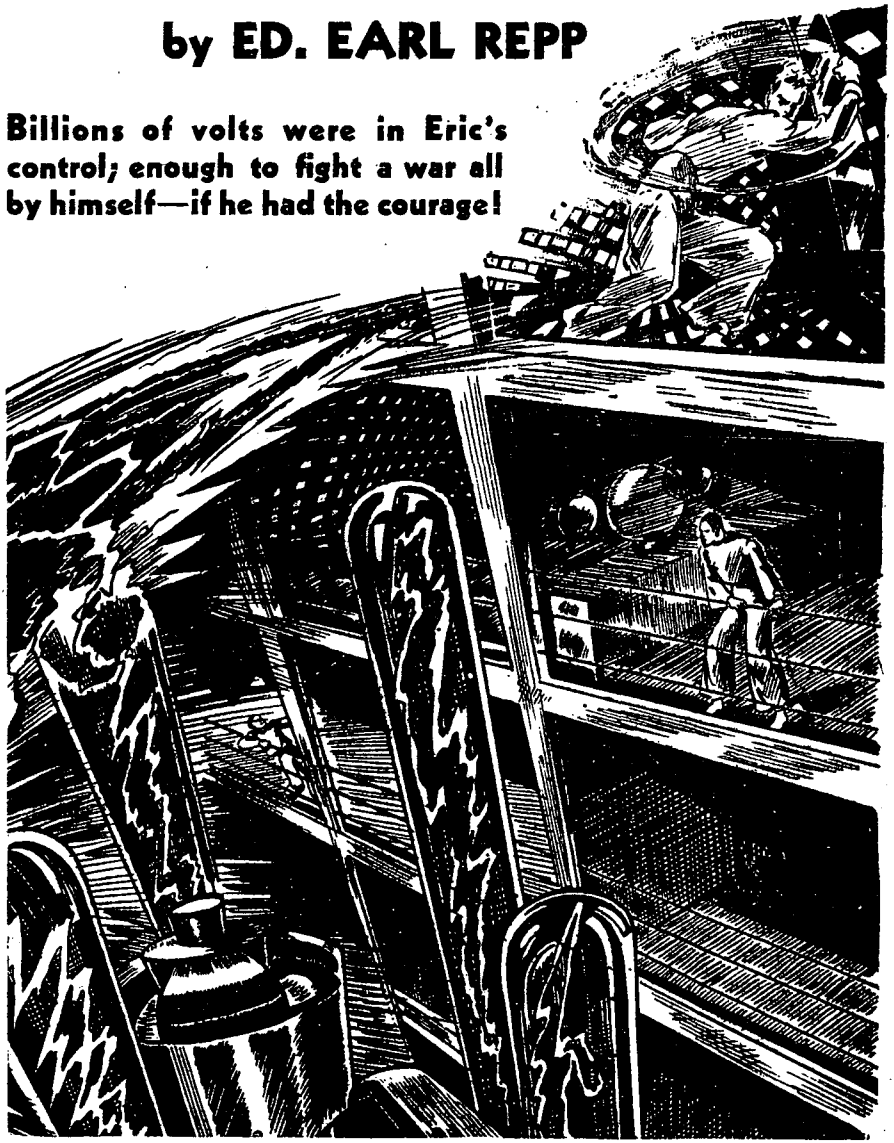
THE DARKNESS

by ED. EARL REPP

Billions of volts were in Eric's control; enough to fight a war all by himself—if he had the courage!



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replied. "They weren't what you'd bet your pay on. I put in a requisition for new ones four months ago."

Among the rescue crew there was a muttering and a sprinkle of oaths. Crowbars and torches rattled as hard-eyed, angry men stirred.

Eric Balt's own jaws ribbed with tough muscle. Four months ago the directors of Sparta Power Corporation had accepted Taney's request for new equipment. This morning Balt's office had got it back with a pink memo attached:

"Check on urgency of replacement."

Every nut, bolt, and plate in Sparta City needed replacement . . . urgently.

"Your Inspector Villard is down there somewhere, sir. I'm afraid he's gone with the rest of the fission-room crew!"

Eric heard Taney with half his mind. Five times since he had become Maintenance Superintendent he had been rushed to the scene of a disaster to supervise the removal of bodies and repair of equipment. It had got so that he started up in the night, hearing the wail of emergency sirens, feeling a tremor ripple under the city as scores of men died horribly.

Yet it took a tragedy like this to push a requisition through!

TANEY moved swiftly down the hall as if his own life were at stake. His stubby body slewed around the baffle-plates like a runaway tractor. He was chunkily-built, bald-headed, and he filled his brown overalls to capacity. Eric had to work to keep up with him.

As they ran on, the thick slabs of steel, designed to hinder explosion-forces from reaching the elevator, grew more and more twisted. A foggy seep of light came from somewhere. A cat might have stumbled, but these men ran surely. Exposed since birth to escaped rays from atomic power plants, something happened to make their eyes intensively sensitive to infra-red light. That was the one advantage of life in Sparta City. They reached a point where the baffles had been ripped from the concrete walls and jammed together in a tangle that blocked the corridor.

Torches hissed blue-white, and the crackling of rusty scale released choking fumes. Eric felt the rugged surface of the plates sear the palms of his gloves as he helped drag severed baffles aside. The final plate clanged on the cement floor.

Taney was across it and charging into the fission-room. He stopped short in the knee-deep rubble of twisted steel and shattered concrete, his squarish bald head swivelling to search the wreckage. On the right-hand wall was a vast splatter of crimson-and-gray that had once been the operator of the fission chamber. The rest of the fission-room crew—and perhaps Clay Villard, chief inspector for Balt's office—lay buried beneath the floor-litter.

Eric stumbled to the jagged hole in the left-hand wall. Broken chunks of cement began to fly as the emergency squad went to work.

The fission chamber itself, visible through the great rent in the wall, was practically unharmed. Yellow tendrils of heavy gas drooled from a line of ports that led to the compressors.

Suddenly Eric Balt wanted to curse it, to attack it like something human. Through that pipe had come the pressure that snuffed out the lives of twenty men.

It hadn't needed to happen! That idea hammered savagely at his brain. Carelessness had done it. Criminal carelessness!

Eric's mind reconstructed the tragedy from the clues about him.

Right here, the operator had stood,

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where Eric was standing. His darting eyes had followed an array of vacillating needles, where Eric looked through a ragged hole smashed fist-like through a steel wall. His fingers had moved over the controls, and as they touched and lingered, rebellious atoms were tamed. The power at his finger-tips—!

One dart of his finger and a sprag of screaming rubidium photons poured upon a glittering crystal of U-235—physicists' lingo for uranium isotope 235. Nothing happened—yet. Pressure was the Philosopher's Stone.

The hiss and clank of the compressors grew more rapid. The heavy yellow gas in the fission chamber was almost liquid. Danger entered. . . .

Pressure blunted the speeding photon-bullets — tuned them to the frequency of the target. Where, before they had passed through the uranium without harming it, they now splattered heavily against the unstable atoms; shattered them, transformed the U-235 into krypton, barium, rubidium, however the fission went.

The resultant energy was 5,000,000 times greater than that released in the burning of coal! No wonder the operators' nerves broke down in a few months' time!

Every fissioned atom gave up 200,000,000 electron volts in the form of new, headlong photons released. Slow those photons down, as the gas would if under too great pressure; direct them *en masse* at a cluster of other U-235 atoms—and the chain was started that only complete explosion could terminate. The line between inefficiency and disaster was measured in insignificant decimals.

An operator must be vigilant. His tools must be right.

This man's compressors had been faulty. He was dead, now, with nineteen of his companions.

ERIC'S eyes, of that blue-gray color peculiar to the Spartans, speared back through the darkness at Taney.

"What's that?"

Taney's sweat-streaked features pinched. "I thought it was you! It came from—" He fell silent, cocking an ear at a far-away tapping.

"—the safety-lock!" Eric rapped. He sprang to a battered door in the near wall.

Torches cut through the twisted wreck of the door. Steel screeched, and the thick plate went reeling inward. Out of the black hole stumbled a wild figure with a bloody slash across one cheek, his gray-green uniform soiled and torn.

For a moment Eric failed to connect this scarecrow figure with anyone he knew. The man leaned heavily against the wall, his numbed gaze holding, horrified, on the bodies arrayed on stretchers. Eric started.

"Villard! How in — !"

The maintenance inspector's voice was a windy croak. "I was inside—when it happened. Operator said to check—split in a seam-weld. He was right! Damn' wind nearly blew my head off when it ripped!"

Eric gripped his arm. "You checked the compressors before the explosion?"

Villard flung an arm in the direction of the fission chamber. "Junk! Not fit to pump automobile tires!"

The cold pinch of gray frost coated Balt's words. "I'll want that in writing. They've sent back too many rush requisitions. I'm going to make a test case out of this."

"What's the use?" Taney's words were blunt with hopelessness. "Inspector Borch is on his way over, now. The complaint will have to go through him. You can bet your calipers it'll get pigeon-holed before any director sees it."

"*Damn* Inspector Borch! I'm going

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to Warren Kayser himself! He and his Big Eight are going to talk turkey. Wages and hours, safety precautions, and a lot of other delicate subjects!"

"That's fine," Villard commented sourly. "You're going to beard the ogre in his den. So what? We've tried to raise a stink before. You know the answer we'll get?

"We're Spartans, toughened to filth and poverty. We and our ancestors have lived in these hell-hole power cities for four generations. Danger? We love it. We don't need a raise in wages because we get board and keep free. Flea-bags to sleep in and cur-dog leavings for food!"

Villard looked like a throw-back to some early twentieth-century soap-box orator, standing there against the wall with his black hair loose and his arms gesturing wildly. His pale, blood-streaked face was hollow cheeked, and there was a lean, hungry look in his deep-set eyes.

"We won't take any of their guff this time," Eric snapped. "They'll agree—or we strike!"

"Strike!" Taney gasped. The sound of the word stopped all action in the room. The rescue squad glanced up, fully attentive to a conversation they had only half listened to a moment before. Not in the ninety-five year life of Sparta City or her sister cities had the Spartans struck.

Time was when they hadn't needed to. They had lived in gleaming white cities where everything was done for their comfort and safety. The pioneers of Sparta knew the dangers of atomic power and guarded against accidents. Their sons and their sons' sons drifted farther away from the original plan of the cities — specialized settlements in which artisans were born to the work. Increased dividends was the prize that lured them from the expense of keeping up the city and replacing worn equipment. Today, Sparta was a ramshackle, smoke-blackened slum where clanking machinery clattered day and night.

VILLARD straightened from the wall, eyes glittering. "Why waste time with an ultimatum? We could bust this city wide open in an hour! Sabotage the turbines and dump the U-235 stores in the river. They haven't an engineer in their fathead organization who could put it back together. We'd have 'em on their knees!"

Eric shook his head. "That's a dangerous precedent to set. If the other cities struck, the country would be paralyzed. Subversive groups could take over in a week."

"What's more subversive than rule by Sparta?" Villard demanded.

"Any 'ism' you can name. It isn't the system that's wrong. The rest of the nation is healthy enough. But Sparta's got to be tamed."

Villard's lips loosened in a scornful half-smile. "If I'm any prophet, Kayser's looking at the White House. He could damned well buy his way in. But I've got me a bunch of boys—more than you think!—that'd see this cesspool blown inside out before he ever saw Washington. In sixty minutes, we could stop every plant!"

Taney offered a belligerent chin. "Any time you try to sabotage my plant —! Orders'll have to start higher than a two-bit inspection boss before I turn over my keys."

Clay Villard had an ugly answer in his eyes, but Eric cut him off.

"You may get your chance, yet. I hope not. Fill out your report and we'll go across the river. Taney, you come along. We'll give them the facts. Then, if we have to—we'll give 'em hell!"

Upstairs, Inspector Borch was impatiently waiting for Eric. His soft fea-

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tures were flushed.

"Terrible thing, Balt! I hope the proper precautions had been taken—?"

"By us—yes. The leak was in your office. We asked for compressors and you sent us a pink memo."

Borch looked bewildered. "But—but routine, you know!" His pudgy hands waved futilely.

"I know. Murderous routine! So we're skipping the usual song-and-dance and giving our report direct to Kayser this time."

The New York representative stood stiffly as the three moved to pass him. "Feeling your authority, aren't you, Balt? Your report will go through the usual channels."

Eric snapped: "Get out of my way."

Borch stood there hunting words, a scowl gathering between his eyes. Eric said again:

"Get out of the way!"

"Don't be a fool! I'll take your report right here—" Borch groped for a pencil.

Eric struck, a soggy-sounding blow that lifted the inspector's chin three inches. Borch landed at the base of the wall.

Rubbing his knuckles, Eric hurried out.

CHAPTER II

Mainspring

THE slim, brown-haired girl stood under the Gothic arch of the big window. New York spread glitteringly many stories beneath, the river a teeming boundary to its activity. Beyond, Sparta City lay a gray smudge on the mainland.

Maureen Sparr heard, with a tingle of excitement, the low, sullen ripple of talk behind her. She was conscious of the director's hostile eyes on her back. She gave no sign that it disturbed her, but in the glass she watched the reflection of eight sullen men slumped around a conference table.

"A woman's got no place here, Maureen! Sparta is a man's organization."

Warren Kayser's square palm came down hard on the table. Maureen could see him sprawled at the table's head, chewing viciously on a pencil eraser.

There was a blue-jowled, ruthless look about the powerful Sparta head that always somehow frightened her. He was tall and solidly built, in a gray business suit, his cheeks shot with thready veins and his dark eyes angry. Physically, he could have crushed her so easily—it gave the girl a sense of triumph to know she had him blocked.

Her face tipped to regard him over her shoulder. "After all, Warren, who owns Sparta; you or I?"

"You, of course! But until you're twenty-one—and that's not for a while yet, young woman—you've got no more say in its operation than an urchin in the streets. I've tripled the value of Sparta stock since your father died. Yet you question—"

"—what? I ask for the privilege of being present at a director's meeting, and you act as though you'd been betrayed. The same document that made you administrator of my father's estate gives me that right. And, gentlemen, I intend to take advantage of it."

Her eyes switched to the man who pushed back his chair and came toward her. Joel Sheridan was lean, brown and blond, the youngest man on the board. In Maureen's set, he was considered a catch. But he was a catch she wished to throw back now, after only two months of being engaged. Sheridan was completely without a sense of humor, coldly efficient even in his love-making.

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"Please, dear—must you be stubborn?" Sheridan took her hands. "If Warren doesn't want you in the way, it's because you wouldn't understand things."

"And that's just why I want to be here!" Maureen insisted. "Do you know that I've never seen Sparta City? And yet in six months it will be up to me to run it at a profit. Perhaps, if I had, I'd know why so many accidents happen. At least, I'll get an inkling from Borch's report."

Looks of apprehension flashed about the table. Sheridan dropped the girl's hands. "This is utter foolishness! Do you think we haven't done our best to protect the workmen? Certainly you hear gossip of our cavalierly treatment of them. The lower classes always find an excuse for their stupidity and lack of ambition."

"Nevertheless," Maureen shook her head, "I'm staying. To put it in a language you understand, it means money to me to learn how to manage the corporation. After Warren's administration ends—"

She stopped, her lips parted.

Not hearing the slightest sound, not seeing the flicker of an eyelid. But feeling—*feeling* like an electric jolt the hatred that exuded from the men about the table!

Suddenly terror chilled the girl so that she trembled.

The realization came brutally vivid that Warren Kayser had never intended to give up his control of Sparta. Without it, what would he be? A run-of-the-mine lawyer. Power was a narcotic that he could not give up. She knew that from her knowledge of the man. If murder was the price he must pay for it, he would pay it.

"You were saying—?" Kayser was leaning on his elbows, his fingers linked, smiling faintly.

Maureen fought to quell the sick fear that nauseated her.

A walnut box on the table made a burring sound. Kayser snapped a switch.

"Some gentlemen from Mr. Borch, Mr. Kayser."

An edge of worry shaded the secretary's voice. Kayser frowned. His wide nostrils drew a deep breath as he stared wrathfully at Maureen.

"Send 'em in!"

THERE was a cold grimness to the plant men as they entered, a look of having been steeped in coal-fumes and oil. A lean toughness in the way they carried their coveralled bodies, that spoke of hard jobs sweated through, of lost sleep, of danger. And there was the gray hatred in their strange cat's eyes, the color of old ice.

Villard still bore the stains of near-tragedy. Blood scabbed his face from a deep slash, and red stains were over his olive uniform. There were feverish glints in his sunken eyes.

Kayser bounced to his feet. "Has Borch lost his mind?" he roared.

"Temporarily — yes," Eric smiled grimly. "It seems our last few reports have been strangled in red tape. We've brought this one in person."

Joel Sheridan left Maureen's side to stalk up to Eric. His long, tanned jaw jutted.

"You'll make your report in the usual way," he snapped. "Get out!"

Eric looked down at him. There was deception in the way his wide shoulders and slim hips cut inches off his actual height.

"Those were Borch's exact words," he said, "before I broke his jaw. You'll go stand by the lady again, or I'll break yours, too."

Sheridan's eyes duelled with the Spartan's. He snorted contemptuously.

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But he backed up.

Eric's eyes filled with contempt as he looked about the table.

"Seventeen months! Five explosions! One hundred men killed! Forty-five mutilated! And now another accident, and at least twenty more dead."

The frozen half-smile lay on Kayser's lips. "Regrettable occurrences, to be sure. Do you imply that I could have prevented them?"

Superintendent Taney struck folded papers against his palm. "Here's a carbon of my requisition of four months ago, asking for new compressors for the latest plant that broke down!"

Maureen Sparr caught her breath. "You mean—it was known that long ago that the compressors were faulty?"

Eric's eyes swivelled to her. "Lady, the same thing has happened in every accident since I've been maintenance boss. New ray-shields, new concentrate bins, new gauges—we asked for them and never got them."

The girl's eyes flashed to Warren Kayser's face. Kayser spoke hurriedly to Eric, his cheeks coloring.

"Accidents are always unfortunate. But what would you suggest? Complete new plants? Good Lord, man, we can't fill every order without assuring ourselves the parts are needed."

"New plants are exactly what we need. I think you know that. The old Sparrs built the city like a precision chronometer; but the clock is running down. Apparently you figure that if you've got to expend a fortune anyway, better to wait until a plant breaks down completely. Lost lives cost you nothing."

He halted, his eyes searching through the slack faces. "From this morning on, that system is finished."

"FINISHED?" Warren Kayser balanced a pencil delicately between thumb and forefinger, his eyes veiled.

Eric said coldly: "These are the things we want: Tripled wages. Slum clearance. New plants and modern safety measures. We want them, and by God, we'll have them!"

Out of the instant's horrified silence boiled a cannonade of angry voices. Townsend, Chief Purchasing Agent, was on his feet, hammering the table.

"A hundred million dollars wouldn't rebuild the plants!" he shouted.

"Say two hundred millions for the whole job," Villard rasped. "Sparta made a profit of a half-billion last year. . . ."

"But that was on all five of the plant cities—!" Sheridan cried.

"All right!" Villard snapped. "With two years' profits the whole system could be replaced. And you'd get used to the matter of increased wages."

Warren Kayser let the hubbub calm before he tapped his pencil for silence.

"The demands, of course, are absurd," he shrugged. "The only question is—what are you going to do now that we refuse?"

"Strike!" Eric said crisply. "You have three days to accede to our demands. If you refuse, the plants shut down. The Eastern United States won't have a kilowatt of power until you agree."

The steel certainty of their strength was in the Spartans' faces. Doubt clouded the directors' eyes. They glanced at Warren Kayser. Some mete of worry must have passed over his mind. But in his face there was only cold hatred.

"This is our ultimatum to you, Spartans. The first moment our power lines go dead, the State militia will march into Sparta City and cut you down like hogs. You'll go back to work or be butchered to the last man. Do you want that?"

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"Do you want cities without light and heat? Without elevators, radios, sanitary plants? Without power to cook your food?"

Kayser shrugged. "Apparently, we've reached an impasse," he said smilingly.

"But we haven't!" Maureen Sparr stamped her foot. "I can see why you didn't want me at the meetings. So this is how you've tripled our profits! I want you men to know that although I own Sparta, I've had nothing to say about how it was run. From today I intend to. Warren, we're going to accept their conditions!"

"Keep out of this, you little fool!" Joel Sheridan snarled.

"Fortunately," Kayser cut in drily, "it isn't up to Miss Sparr to say yes or no in anything concerning Sparta, Inc. The interview is closed, gentlemen—"

Maureen's eyes flashed. "Do you think so, Warren? It's true I can't legally force you, but I can coerce. The papers would go wild with what I've heard this morning. They could ruin those carefully-nurtured hopes of yours towards the presidential nomination. They'd love it! Don't you want to reconsider?"

The conversation froze. Warren Kayser was for once without words. Maureen stood haughtily with her chin up and tiny flames dancing in her eyes.

There was a laugh in Eric Balt's voice as he stirred. "I can see you have things to discuss privately. You know where to find us when you come to an agreement. Good day, gentlemen. And thanks, Miss Sparr!"

CHAPTER III

Quarry

MAUREEN was to regret her threat. Warren Kayser said not a word to her after the Spartans left. He marshalled the directors from the room, and silence came to fill the lofty walnut-panelled chambers.

For an hour Maureen was alone in the council room. There was a cold, fluttering terror in her breast. She had found the door locked. There was no one to hear her pounding. Bitterly, now, she regretted taking part in the argument. Better to have kept still and gone secretly to Eric Balt.

The thought sent her swiftly to the window. Where in that vast smoke-world could she find him? Or, if she knew where to look—how to get out of the building?

Within her, the certainty mounted that Warren Kayser intended to make his administration of Sparta a permanent one—today!

Again she tried the doors, but the pounding beat hollowly back through the suite. She thought of the fire-escape. But there was no access to it from the windows of this room. Or—was there!

She cranked the steel sash out and leaned forward. The iron stairway passed only eight feet beneath.

Maureen caught up her courage in a quick breath. She slipped across and for a deadly moment was hanging by her fingertips from the rough gray cement. The landing smashed against her ankles with aching force. A moment she crouched, feeling the frightened tempo of her heart.

Then she was scurrying on awkwardly high-heeled slippers down forty-five stories of black slatted stairs.

Dusk was a rust-gray strata in the west when she crossed the bridge. A knot of river idlers ran bold searching eyes over her as she hurried into the slatternly, dark streets.

She was abruptly conscious of how foreign she must appear to the Spartans' eyes. Her close-fitted blue velvet-

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een dress, and matching slippers made her a moving flash of color in the drab streets. Hastily she turned inward the three-carat baguette solitaire Joel Sheridan had given her. There was no way to hide the heavy bracelet and brooch she wore.

When she had hurried along four or five blocks, she discovered the men of the bridge behind her. Panic caught her coldly. She swerved to a fat old granny smoking a cigarette in a doorway.

"I'm looking for Eric Balt!" The words came out in a rush. "Can—can you tell me—"

The woman's evil old eyes were on Maureen's bracelet. "Straight ahead, dearie!" she cackled.

The sheer lasciviousness of her grin drove Maureen on with feet that wanted to run..

Deeper and deeper into the city, past tenements that stunk with decay, and crib-like doorways where slovenly women cried out at her. Maureen would have turned back, but now she was hopelessly lost. She felt the catch break on her bracelet as a lanky, red-headed woman snatched at it. Instantly there was a shriek from the woman's companion.

"*Diamonds!* Stop her!"

"She's mine! I saw her first!"

THAT from the red-headed one. Maureen fled without looking back.

Darkness was puddling in the streets. It made running difficult for her, but for the Spartans' eyes daylight would hold forever. There was the heavy thud of men's feet in the bedlam of women's shrill screaming.

The girl flung around a corner, paused to slip off her high-heeled shoes and run on barefooted. Numberless times she fell. The sidewalks were slimy with filth. Her dress was a rag, her knees bled and her palms were pitted with gravel where she had fallen.

Sobbing, she zig-zagged down alleys, up narrow streets. The profane howling of the pack was a hundred feet behind. Her bleeding feet were slowing.

A tenement doorway loomed, and the girl darted into it. Down the worn carpet and out again into a yard. A jungle of ash barrels, boxes and junk. Maureen's terrified eyes searched for a door in the crumbling fence. She failed to find one, but after a moment her eyes stopped on something better. . . .

Flowing like water into every room and cranny, the mob poured through the tenement house. When they began to straggle out the back, the girl was not in sight. Boxes and cans were upturned by snarling searchers.

Maureen was faint with relief when, through the tiny basement window beneath which she crouched, she saw them leave. She struggled for clearness of thought. She dared not leave. Nor could she stay here forever. She came at last to a bitter decision. Tomorrow, when it was light, she would try to find Eric Balt again.

A night in this rat-infested cesspool!

The ragged burning of her nerves gradually soothed. The hours brought increasing calmness. Shortly after midnight she fell asleep.

ERIC'S quarters adjoined the maintenance warehouse on the south side of one of Sparta's less decrepit avenues. His grilled window gave on a dismal industrial thoroughfare. From his bed, on sleepless nights, he could look out into a stark canyon of shadow-caves and vague smears of light.

Eric slept light. His head snapped from the pillow when the imperative knock sounded on the door that night. A mutter of angry voices filtered from the street.

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The cold air, the jarring contact of cold cement with his bare feet, sharpened his perception. He pulled on pants and a shirt, dug into slippers, and moved to the door. The voices, now, he catalogued as those of Clay Villard and Taney.

Taney held a revolver buried to the front-sight in the black-haired inspection boss' spine.

"Get in there, you flash-in-the-pan parlor pink!" he snarled.

Villard was a tempest in chains. Inside the room, he whirled. In the light's full flare, Eric saw the swelling under his eye.

"By God, Taney, this will cost you something!" The words crowded past his clenched teeth. The cords of his neck stood out.

"Taney! What's up?" Eric stood touseled, frowning at the gun.

"This — this — bolshevik, boss!" Taney's unshaven face screwed up with contempt. "Plottin' to wreck the city. Him and his red-belted feists!"

Staring at the red leather belt encircling Villard's spare midriff, Eric came under increased bewilderment. "Once again, and slowly."

Taney gulped a chest-full of air. "I saw him and some of them no-good slag muckers bumming around the old wharves about nine o'clock. They were up to some mischief; I seen that. At ten o'clock they slunk into an old warehouse. I followed 'em. Gawd! The place was full of bums wearing these red belts! Five thousand, anyway. They got down and crawled like damn' snakes when Villard stepped up on the soap box."

Villard growled: "Somebody else is going to crawl before this is finished."

Taney rocked the gun as if fighting a restless trigger finger. His undershot jaw became grimmer as he went on.

"You should've heard him spiel! Like something out of a pipe-dream. They're going to lead us to power, him and his red-belts. *'America for Spartans! The men who run the plants run the nation!'* If I heard that once, I heard it a hundred times. They're going to sabotage Sparta City, raise general hell in New York every night. The New Yorkers will be helpless in the dark. In a few days, things will be ripe for them to move on to the Chicago plant and organize the workers." Taney snorted. "I caught 'im as he was going home."

Fury came rioting up through Eric, so that his fists knotted and he rocked toward Villard. "I credited you with better sense!" he ground out. "You see yourself leading an army of Spartans to power, but you can't see any farther than that. The futility and certain defeat of such a move!"

Villard's pale eyes, set narrowly at the sides of his thick-bridged nose, snapped. "Where do you get this loyalty to the hand that strangles us? Are you blind? They've got our faces ground into the mud, and we won't get out of it until we get up by our own power. We've got the strength to go as high as we want. We can rule America!"

"You say that so damned easily!" Eric flung back. "'We can rule America!' Twenty million workers can't rule a nation as a body. There's got to be a ruling body formed, a small one to carry out the majority's wishes. You can't form such a body in the midst of a revolution. The time—"

"Time enough when we've won."

"There won't be time enough! There'll be anarchy by then. Your red-belts will be only one of many such groups that suddenly merge out of the fire. Every man will be his own dictator. Stealing food when he's hungry . . . having his way of every unprotected woman. . . . It won't work, Villard!"

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He brought his voice down by an effort. "Relax for a few days. Give Kayser a chance to grant our demands. He'll have to. After we get our bearings, we'll have twenty million votes to swing reforms our way."

Villard laughed, a harsh, dry rasp in his throat. "Slow and easy, eh? A fifty-year plan. Not for us, mister. We're ready to hit, and we won't be pulling our punches. Take some good advice, Balt. Get on the wagon while you can!"

He was starting for the door, then; to be blocked off by Taney. The keg-shaped superintendent glanced quizzically at Eric, undecided as to the ethics of the moment.

Eric shrugged. "Let him go. What can we do? If we tried to hold him, his crowd would make a martyr of him."

Villard's cocky grin, flashing back from the street, was the gesture of a man holding the strings of fate in his fingers. He was striding off into the darkness when lights played over him from the end of the street, and voices rose commandingly.

CHAPTER IV

Breakdown!

THEY broke from a brisk walk into a run, flashlights bobbling, a squadron of blue-coated police headed by two men in civilian clothing. Villard took a single glance and plunged into an alley. A pistol cracked, and the scream of a slug spanging off a cornice was a slash of sound across the darkness.

The total surprise of the moment kept Eric Balt riveted in the doorway. Taney gaped over his shoulder. To the Spartans' eyes, the scene was daylight-clear. Sawed-off shotguns and gas pistols flashed in the hands of the policemen. A gray ribbon of smoke fluttered from the barrel of the pistol carried by the civilian in the lead. It was Warren Kayser, and at his heels ran Joel Sheridan.

Eric flung back into the room, slammed the door. His lips were tight across his teeth.

"This is it, Taney! The purge! They're trying to stop the strike by removing the leaders."

"I'll take Kayser first. Then Sheridan." Taney's voice was a matter-of-fact growl.

Eric dragged him across the room by the arm. "Save your shells as a last resort. That corner ceiling panel is loose. Climb on the chair and crawl in—

Taney swung up, his body squeezing through the hole with a last-second boost by Eric.

Crawling into the warm, musty darkness, Eric let the door fall back.

"This is my safe deposit vault. Any time I've got a few dollars or a carton of cigarettes I don't want stolen, I stow it up here."

The door slammed open, and in the tautness hard heels jarred on the floor. Quick, ruthless hands slung the furniture about.

"They've slipped out. This rat's nest is empty. Balt and Taney must've left ahead of Villard." That was Warren Kayser speaking brittlely into the sudden quiet.

Excited voices rose simultaneously. "Anderson will get them—" "They can't get through the dragnet—!" "We'll have them by morning, Mister Kayser!"

"Don't fool yourself. Those Spartans know this layout like a ghost knows the catacombs."

Footfalls hastened back to the street. Straining, the listeners barely deciphered the jerky flow of conjecture that oozed through the walls.

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Sheridan's voice had a frown: "Maybe they haven't got her. It looks like they'd keep her with them."

"There're holes in this city where they could hide a three-ring circus forever without being discovered. If we don't find Maureen tonight, our goose is on the way to a quick boil. I'm convinced this is a kidnapping for coercion. And yet she may be getting together with them to block us."

"Borch thinks they've already got some kind of secret organization," Sheridan grunted.

"Well, they've damned few guns for their army, that's a cinch," Kayser snorted. "We'll do the best— Good God!"

"What's the matter?"

"New York! Pitch dark! *They've sabotaged the plants!*"

IN the grayness, Eric looked at Taney. Shock had its flabby stamp on the superintendent's features. Down in the street a bridge of horror stretched across the void, and crumbled away as Sheridan yelled, his voice reedy with terror.

"Somebody go back for men! We'll split up and hold them in the plants!"

Weary, disgusted, Warren Kayser's tones harshly overrode him. "Two men to a plant? We wouldn't last five minutes. We'll get out of Sparta City while we can. I've got a notion we'll be lucky to do that!"

Then the voices came no more, and a ragged shuffle of running feet ended in silence. Eric and Taney left the room. From the middle of the deserted street, they could see New York, a range of black crags along the gray horizon, not a spot of light breaking the total darkness.

"Must have been the diversion plant." Eric's long body slumped a little. "All the plants couldn't have failed simultaneously. What power remained would have been re-routed to the city."

"Eric Balt!"

The thin cry brought Eric about in a swift pivot. He stared at the girl standing in the middle of the street a hundred feet away. Then, suddenly, he was striding toward her.

"Girl!" He gripped her by the shoulders and looked down at her. Her dress was ripped, and white skin shone through the rents. Her makeup was gone. Scratches criss-crossed her face. Little remained of an expensive coiffure; little remained to prove this was the girl Eric had been so strongly attracted to in Kayser's office that morning.

"I tried to find you! They locked me in the council room, and I—I was afraid!"

"Of what?"

"That Kayser would kill me!" The girl was trembling. A surge of pity flowed hotly through Eric. Taney came running up. The sordid, vicious story of greed that Maureen gasped out brought revengeful noises from Taney's barrel chest, kindled sparks in the glacial blue of Eric Balt's eyes.

"I wanted to reach you. But I knew as soon as I left the bridge, it was a mistake to try. I hid until I saw the searching party go by. Then I followed. I wouldn't have believed anyone could be so—so vile as those women!"

Eric's smile was bitter. "You saw our town the hard way. You went through the Bowery and the red light district, I'm afraid. Most Spartans are as normal as you could expect."

He took her arm to help her to the room. Maureen came close against him, feeling in his lean strength a warm sense of security.

"Boss, we're wastin' time!" Taney fidgeted. "We can save ourselves a month of repair work if we knock Vil-

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lard over before he runs hog-wild through the whole plant. Put the girl in the attic and—"

Eric nodded, but Maureen drew back. "You'll take me with you!"

"Haven't you had enough of Sparta's night-life?" Eric smiled bleakly.

Maureen's head shook. "If I can talk to Villard, perhaps I can convince him that there's a better way—a legal, safe way—to defeat Kayser—!"

"He's a brick wall where reason is concerned. You'll be safer here."

Again she shook her head, and drawing a few steps down the street, smiled back tantalizingly. "Coming along? I think Taney said we should hurry—"

Eric shrugged and followed. They worked swiftly to the center of the city, through dismal alleys and rotting tenement districts. Eric's gaze cut through every black alley-mouth and doorway. Villard's red-belts would likely be on the prowl. But they came into the square that set off the diversion plant before they tangled with them.

In the very air about the structure, power whispered and crackled, power that fed a thousand cities, large and small. Ominous, grim, the plant rose skeletally from the barren ground of the square. The fluted tower of blackened masonry stabbed uneven pinnacles into the belly of low-hanging fog and smoke-clouds.

From the square-piled marble flanking the entrance, a cordon of burly slag-muckers loomed like gray watchdogs. Meshing swiftly, they cut off Eric's advance. He searched for guns and saw none, although crowbars and wrenches were everywhere. They made no attempt to break past the guards.

Standing back, he shouted: "Villard!"

AN answer whined down from the fourth level of the tower. Rifle-lead splattered on the cement about their feet. Maureen cried out sharply. Eric gripped her hand. He had a worried instant of fearing that Taney might attempt to return the fire. But the plant boss stood stolidly, arms crossed, conscious of the futility of matching a pistol with rifle-fire.

The guards roared with laughter. When they were quiet, Villard's gloating shout came. "I should have put it through that fat slob of a straw-boss! Ready to join up now, Balt?"

"Not while I've got my sanity," Eric retorted. "I came here to break your neck if I could get at you. So you've started, have you? What do you figure on using as weapons for your army?"

"I've got the only weapon I need," Villard countered. "Watch!"

Somewhere behind dark windows a relay crashed. High in the tower, blue and green flame licked across a gap. Then a blaze of light, visible through a notch in the buildings, sent their glances across the river.

A hundred thousand neon tubes burst into glory. Up the sides of dark skyscrapers zig-zagged strings of glittering jewels. A river of white light gushed down Broadway. Traffic signals flashed red, green and gold. Above the city, misty spokes accelerated as beacons began to turn.

Then, without warning, it was over.

Along the river, interlaced power-lines became scarlet cobwebs, heated to the softness of lead by a teriffic overload. A mililon fuses blew suddenly out. New York City relapsed into the horror of complete darkness.

The dull nervelessness of despair weighed upon Eric Balt. Nor had Maureen the spirit to make her plea.

Villard himself seemed overcome by the spectacle. For seconds he held his silence. When he spoke, it was with the timbre of elation in his voice.

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"I like that better than guns. But I've got a proposition to make Kayser, and I'm sending for him tomorrow. You'll be here too.. Come at noon—and come without guns."

CHAPTER V

Madman's Truce

SUNLIGHT dissolved early morning mist over the cities. It was Autumn, and the night's chill clung damply to unheated buildings. Mobs stirred sluggishly in New York's streets, bewildered, frightened.

Maureen Sparr slept late. Eric and Taney dozed in turns, one man always guarding the door.

Eric Balt had never had time for romance. Love was a furtive thing in Sparta City, robbed of any importance by the constant drive for work, the sordid seriousness of life. Marriages were convenience; married couples received a dowry and slightly increased wages. It was to the directors' interests to support the failing birth rate.

For Eric, it was something new and breath-taking, the surge of emotions Maureen's nearness awoke in him. Analytically he dissected the reaction. Its complexity baffled him. He knew only that he was grateful for the excuse to stand guard by the foot of her bed, watching the rise and fall of her breasts in sleep, the curl of long lashes upon her cheeks.

Then he remembered that he was a Spartan and she a thrice-wealthy heiress. He was all business when she awoke.

About eleven, the clanking of drawbridges broke through the sullen quiet. Eric leaped for his tiny bedside radio. "Power again!" he jerked.

Static crashed deafeningly. Through it struggled the excited words of a news commentator.

"—where thousands were stalled in elevators for hours! Subway crashes took a score of lives. Fires razed whole buildings, as alarm systems failed and small blazes grew to roaring hells. A liner was badly damaged when a drawbridge failed to raise after signalling 'go ahead'. In other cities, conditions were equally disastrous.

"At three-forty-five a. m. power suddenly came on again with a jolt that burned out millions of fuses. Authorities have commandeered the entire stock of fuses to make replacements at vitally necessary points. Power-men are working at top speed to repair burned wires and transformers. It is hoped that a truce will be reached with the strikers before nightfall. Warren Kayser, president of Sparta, Incorporated, is at my side in response to urgent requests to comment on the present crisis."

Someone cleared his throat, and Kayser's voice come, low and grave:

"I wish I might give to the Eastern United States, this morning, the encouragement it is waiting for. I feel deeply the responsibility that lies with me. By telephone, last night, I spoke with the President. His response to my appeal for aid was to ask me to lay the case before the Labor Board when it convenes next week. I am afraid that in a week the crisis will have passed—one way or another.

"Hence I have made arrangements today to confer with Clay Villard, leader of the strikers. I can only promise that I will make any sacrifice necessary to restore normalcy—even though it means granting the stringent demands of the Spartans. . . ."

Maureen snapped the radio off. "Liar! Charlatan!" Tears of anger swam in her eyes. "He's making his play now for the nation's backing. If he and Villard do get together, nothing

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can stop him." She turned helplessly to Eric. "What can we do?"

Eric glanced at the clock. "Nothing, until twelve. Maybe not then. But we won't be missing any plays."

TWELVE o'clock . . . zero hour for America.

Warren Kayser was on time. Standing near the door of the tower, Eric, Taney, and Maureen saw the big black limousine come swiftly through the streets to stop on the square. Kayser got out, Joel Sheridan striding around from the driver's seat. They came up the walk, two wide-shouldered, dogged figures.

Kayser passed the Spartan group without looking at them. His face was gray and hard. The others followed them inside.

In the lobby, a dozen red-belted workmen, armed variously with guns and tools, merged to flank them like a miiltary escort. In this fashion they were taken to the big central conversion room. Villard was alone there, an almost flimsy figure on the brass-railed mezzanine that crossed the far end of the room. Banks of relays, switches, a huge board of winking colored lights, loomed beside him. Below, a vast sea of pulsating machinery: Tubes that surged with inner flame; mighty coils of shining copper; crouching black masses of transformers.

He turned swiftly at their approach, a brittle grin possessing his mouth. A rifle came to his hand, and he caught it loosely in the crook of his elbow.

"Not a bad talk this morning, Kayser," he said seriously. "Not bad at all."

"I can't say I intended to glorify you any, my friend," Kayser snapped.

"But you certainly glorified yourself! And at present that's good enough."

The feeling was strong in Eric that neither his group nor Kayser's was ever intended to leave this place. He had come with that suspicion. And yet he had come knowing the futility of dodging danger this late in the game.

"Well, master-mind, what's the deal?" he bit out.

Villard looked at him thoughtfully. "Your part won't be hard to play. You're here simply because I don't want you running around spilling your brand of loose talk. I had to have the girl because she'd be in the way later on. Don't look so sour, Taney; I've got plans for you, too."

Sheridan was looking at Maureen. He tried to come close to her, but she immediately placed herself so that Eric was between them. Coloring, Sheridan snapped his eyes to Villard.

"Let's get at it. What's your proposition?"

Villard now stood among the burly guardsmen. At his hand were the switches that could paralyze New York City in one flashing second.

"Kayser, you talked a lot of common-sense yesterday," he said frankly. "It's a fact you could make me plenty of trouble. It's also true what Balt said—unless I keep tight hold on the reins, the wagon's going to get away from me. Well, I'm not greedy. I'm willing to cut you in on the deal."

Surprise flared briefly in Kayser's eyes, and was gone. "You're smart," he grunted. "I've taken steps to blast Sparta City off the map the next time the power goes off."

Villard said levelly: "It's going off tonight, but you aren't going to drop a lousy bomb. You're going to sit in your office rubbing your hands over the fun you and I are having!"

Before twenty-five words had been spoken, Eric Balt had sized the situation up. Through slate-cold eyes, he

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watched the play now, hearing the lines spoken as he had foreseen them.

Villard smiled. "That speech of yours gave me the idea. You're in a position to make a sort of god out of yourself . . . with my cooperation. You slung plenty of mud on the President today, and you can do a lot better. I'm going to pull this switch in a minute, and it will stay out for two or three days. New York will be in a hell of a shape by then. They'll be begging the President to help them, and he's bound to fail. Nothing he can do."

"And then Kayser, the fair-haired boy, steps in!" That was Eric's deep, rasping voice. "At tremendous risk to himself, he pulls the people's chestnuts out of the fire. He gives them power again. Tells them he's finally at liberty to speak the truth. Maureen Sparr, the real boss of Sparta, is the one responsible for the degrading condition of Sparta City! But Boss Kayser has bucked her strong-arm methods and taken over the company, giving the Spartan laborers all they asked."

During Eric's angry flare-up, Clay Villard had watched him unemotionally. "Right! And with election less than a year off—"

"What do you want out of it?" Kayser shrewdly knifed in.

He and Sheridan had come to stand close to the blade-thatched leader. Behind the red-belts loomed the low guard-rail. Eric's jaw was set in sharp angles.

"Not the President's chair, anyway. As you say, I'm not suited for the job. Besides, it's bad on the digestion. But you'll need a labor boss. The salary will no doubt be considerably more than I'm getting here."

"No doubt!"

Kayser's chuckle ended as Maureen said in a choked voice: "You're trading thousands of human lives for power! You know what it will mean to leave these cities without electricity. Hospitals shut down . . . more subway deaths . . . Riots!"

"The case, after all," Kayser clipped, "is one of Hobson's choice. Frankly, the end in view is not repellent to me. The means alone is different."

His eyes went from her to Eric. From Eric to Taney. Then he smiled thinly. "You see where this leaves you, Maureen. And Balt—"

Eric put his arm about the girl as she pressed tremblingly against him.

"You wouldn't forget old Taney, would you?" the superintendent of Plant Eighteen said abruptly.

Eric, a little surprised by his asumed tone, glanced at him. And glanced again, his attention captured by the blaze in Taney's eyes. What he read set to thrumming every nerve in his body.

The rifle slid into Villard's grasp. "No, indeed! As a matter of fact—" A shell slipped greasily into the chamber. But the barrel of the weapon had not lifted two inches when Eric Balt leaped!

LOUD and sharp over the throaty purr of power equipment rang the crack of the rifle. Lead whipped Eric's shirt, and then he was crashing against Villard. His powerful leg-drive slammed the Spartan against the guard rail.

The flush of fury sucked from Villard's cheeks and left them gray-yellow with terror. Desperately his heels rapped against the slippery metal floor, digging for purchase. Eric felt the pincer-like grasp of fingers in his shirt, and he struck viciously at Villard's forearm.

A hand flashed above Eric's head. Kayser reached to grab Villard's gun. In the next moment the lanky, red-belted figure levered over the brass rail-

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ing and soared out above the floor. His scream tore raggedly through the tumbling echoes of the rifle-shot. Spread-eagled, he landed in a bank of giant vacuum tubes. Flame licked over him. Smoke sputtered from his seared flesh, and Eric Balt turned sick.

Joel Sheridan had leaped clear of Villard. From his coat pocket he jerked the fat, black automatic he had brought in defiance of Villard's orders. Taney was ready. His own revolver jumped. Two screaming shots blasted into the man's chest, shots that drove Sheridan against the rail, where he slowly twisted to the floor.

The short hairs on Eric's neck prickled as he awaited a barrage of shots from Villard's guardsmen. His back was to them, a wide-open target. Yet his charge did not slow as he rushed Warren Kayser. The rifle was coming up to meet Taney's revolver fire.

Pale flame spewed close to Eric's face. His forearm jarred the rifle out of line, even as he pistoned a short, hard punch to Kayser's stomach. But there was a queerness to the way the blow landed. Kayser's muscles made no defensive stiffening. He sagged limply against the Spartan. Warm blood sopped through his shirt front, and the moist feel of it against Eric's skin told him that Taney had shot first.

And still there was no crashing reverberation of gunfire from the Spartans. Eric grabbed at the fallen rifle as he came about. The guardsmen hung back, confused. Guns and weapons dangled from unwilling fingers. One of them said hastily:

"We—we don't want no trouble, Mister Balt!"

"It was Villard's idea," another cut in. "But he never told us we'd be getting in for trouble. We don't want a revolution. Just—good grub and good wages."

Maureen's voice had a breathless quality to it. She was pale, shaken. "You'll get those things, and more," she promised. "Everything you need to make this city the way it was intended. And soon as you can elect a leader, I'll work with him to frame a plan the majority will like."

Taney glared at the ex-rebels. "I guess we won't need an election. Eh, boys?"

"No, sir!" Grins brushed hard-jawed faces, and the men looked at Eric.

Eric masked his embarrassment with a scowl. "It'll be done in the customary way," he grunted. "Meantime, there's cleaning up to do. I'll take Miss Sparr back."

Outside, Maureen said: "You'd better plan on staying a while. You'll need time to study the company before you take over the management of it."

For that, Eric had only a look of complete shock.

The girl was sliding a big solitaire off her finger, then.

"Joel's," she murmured. "He was going to run Sparta for me after we were married. Kayser was right: it is a man's company. So I think it would be nice if—if you could take his place . . ."

Even Eric knew enough about women to understand that. Spartan or not, there was nothing clumsy about the way he took her in his arms, while Taney and the slag-muckers grinned down from the windows above!

THE END

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BAT-SCIENCE

By ELLIS WHITE

BATS flying about through an old deserted house with the wind howling in the trees and rain beating down on the roof is usually chosen as the opening scene for our movie thrillers. From these experiences, we all assume that bats only inhabit old, deserted houses and seem to always attend things of mystery. Well, nothing could be further from the truth.

The reason bats tend toward nocturnal habits is that they are relatively defenseless and thus spend the day in hiding. Some spend the day hanging from the higher branches of trees as in the case of the Indian flying fox. The Australian bats spend the day hiding away in the tea-trees or mangroves located in impenetrable swamp lands. The smallest of all bats, the Tylonycteris pachypus, found in the East Indies spends the day in the hollow joint of a bamboo stem. The American bat, on the other hand, is the most sociable of all the species and spends the day in between the walls or roof and the outer sheathing of houses. However, the greatest proportion of bats tend to live in caves.

For food the bats enjoy a great variety of insects especially those who also have nocturnal habits. There are also vegetarian bats and those who are not too particular and will eat both insect and/or vegetable.

Probably the fussiest eater of all the bats is the vampire bat of South and Central America, who thrive exclusively on the blood of other mammals or birds. Of course, they are not particular as to whose blood they live on just so long as it is nice and fresh—preferably from a wound that they have made themselves. The vampire bats are probably the most ferocious of all the bats and will attack a herd of cattle, mules, horses, or goats during the night. If necessary, the vampire will even feed upon human blood.

The mark of the vampire bat is always the same—a shallow and clean-cut scoop into the flesh from which the blood will flow for a longer period than from the wound of other carnivorous animals since the blood cannot clot as easily. The wound of the vampire is not painful and many of his victims, either human or animal, will go right on sleeping while the vampire has his meal.

The vampire waits until his victim is asleep and then swiftly makes his incision into the flesh. On humans, the favorite points of incision are the nose and toes since they are usually uncovered. Upon awakening in the morning, men in the tropics have often found a slight wound on their toes, nose, or fingertips with blood still trickling from the wound.

The vampire is very considerate in that he never kills his victim but he has been known to seriously weaken some animals after repeated attack. In some cases, cattlemen and sheepherders have been forced to move to new grazing lands only because of the frequent vampire attacks.

Bats vary in size from the huge flying foxes of Java and the Philippines with a wing spread of over fifty inches to the small East Indian bat who, when curled up, is no bigger than a man's thumb.

No one knows how long ago the bat became the only flying mammal besides Dumbo but evidence proves it was over 50,000,000 years ago. Their bodies are peculiarly adapted to flight and resemble those of a bird rather than a mammal. They possess a short neck, strong chest muscles, a tapering abdomen, slender hind legs with knee joints that are reversed, and no fur on their wings—all of which decreases air resistance and enables them to fly.

Despite popular belief, the bat is not blind but has eyes possessing most of the elements found in the eyes of other mammals. He possesses an internal ear which is very sensitive to sound which enables him to avoid hitting obstacles during flight or to catch insects for food.

Bats possess very excellent memories as to their places of hibernation and will return to exactly the same spot in the same cave autumn after autumn even after spending the summer in some far off place.

Bats are peculiar in that although they are quite sociable towards their own species they never-the-less always keep other members of the group at arm's length. A truly interesting experience is to be had in watching a large group of bats return to their daytime roost. The first to arrive select, of course, the favorite spots and have to continually resist the attempts of the late comers who wish to encroach upon their desirable resting place. The din finally becomes deafening before the entire colony is finally settled for the day. When twilight approaches, the bats all awaken, clean their fur, stretch their wings a few times, give a few screeches at the late comers who might have encroached upon their resting place during the day, and then fly off in groups of two's or three's, or perhaps by themselves in search for their evening meal.

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